

## AUTUMN FIELDS



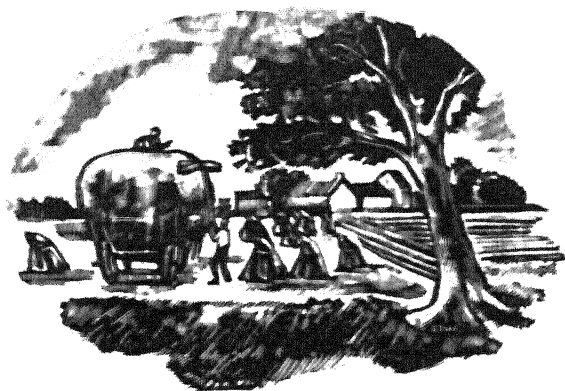


# AUTUMN FIELDS

by  
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CHICAGO



FOR  
MY MOTHER  
ON HER 81ST BIRTHDAY

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THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN  
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## TO THE READER

THIS book is in no sense an autobiography. It is the history of a small and remote community of which I was a part and of whose lives and doings I have constituted myself the narrator and interpreter.

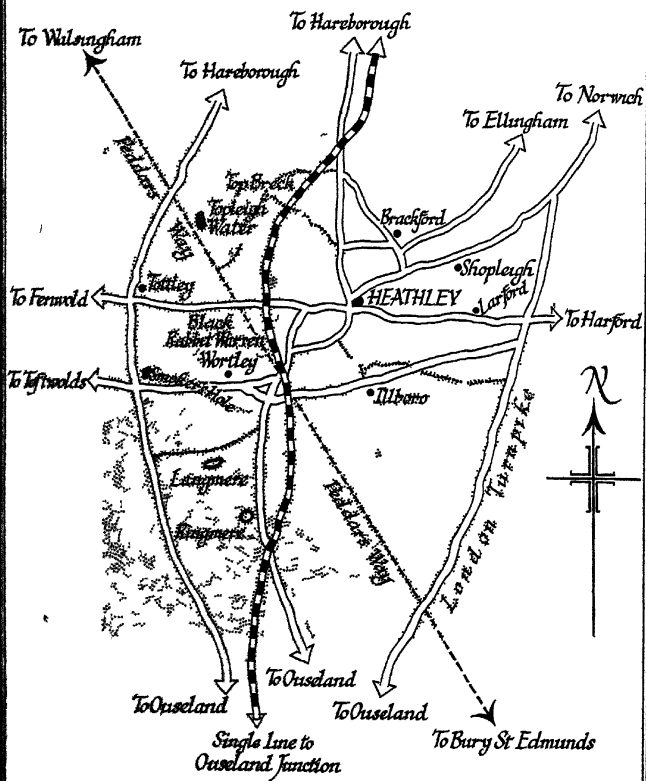
In these days there is a natural cry for books of escape. Escape and romance are much the same thing for romance is only some other person at some other time in some other place. But this book is no romance, and its escape is personal. For now that life and religion, work and even leisure are cumbered with perplexities, and often of our own making, it all at once seemed to me not only necessary but salutary that I should make for myself time to stand and stare to look back some fifty years to those who preceded me—their ways of life, their perplexities, their philosophy, the land they tilled and their forgotten simplicities. But if I had not also believed that such a recalling would interest others, and that they would find much of their own to-day in another's yesterday, then this book would never have been written.

As to what may seem autobiographical, it is recorded only to give the narrator a local habitation and a name, and its chronology is necessarily erratic. But the story of the unknown community is always personal experience or well-authenticated tradition. It is no dry-as-dust, documentary survey of rural conditions, but a simple relation and discursive. Simple things demand simplicity of presentation and it is a poor country lane that has not its attractive bypaths.

Names generally are altered and there is no unjust reference to the dead or unkindly mention of those rare few who may still be living.

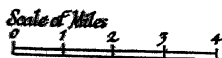
M. H.

*July 1943*



## HEATHLEY AND NORTH-EAST BRECKLAND

Tracks and Paths .....  
 Roads ====  
 Heaths and Bracks [stippled area]  
 Railway - - - - -





### *Chapter I*

## HOME TO ROOST

IT is fifty years to the day since I first saw Breckland, at least with the eyes of discernment. Not that we had not lived there long enough. The Parish Register of Heathley begins well before the Armada, and on its very first page is our name, and thereafter for many years a record of our births, marriages, and deaths. But even those first names have a Puritan flavour, and when the Quakers founded a society in a neighbouring town my ancestors became strong adherents, and after that the Parish Register mentions us only occasionally. Some of us went with other Quakers to America, and there is no wonder that later still we were among the first supporters of Wesley and in the nineteenth century became Gladstonian Radicals. But had that Friends' Meeting House been near, I think we should still have been Quakers.

When I was two and a half years old I was adopted by an aunt, a stepsister of my mother. She was much older than my mother and with no child of her own, and doubtless the handing over of myself fulfilled some sort of agreement. But I could be well spared, for my brother had been born and my eldest sister, and another sister was on the way. Nevertheless, according to my mother, the house was for her a place of misery after my departure, though when I returned to it some six years later, it was to a family of six who had no knowledge of me and regarded me, and rightly, as a kind of freak.

My aunt lived in London, and the only house I faintly recall of the various ones we occupied was one that overlooked





# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I HOME TO ROOST	1
II THE SCENE	12
III CHURCH AND STATE	26
IV CHURCH AND STATE— <i>continued</i>	37
V THE RISING GENERATION	49
VI THE LABOURER AND THE LAND	61
VII THE LABOURER AND THE LAND— <i>continued</i>	74
VIII THE METHODISTS	86
IX THE METHODISTS— <i>continued</i>	100
X TWO UNFORGETTABLE MEN	113
XI SOME HEATHLEY ODDMENTS	127
XII HEATHLEY WOMEN	141
XIII POACHING	153
XIV VILLAGE CRICKET	165
XV THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE SPRING AND WINTER	178
XVI THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE AUTUMN AND WINTER	188

Finsbury Park My uncle, a tall, immensely powerful man, had been much at sea and his hobby was painting in oils. As he was self-taught and his recollections of his native Wales none too vivid, his paintings were generally grandiose in conception and horrific in execution. My mother was given some of them, and I can still see cows and pigs spotted and wooden as those from a Noah's Ark, and very blue sky and bluer water, the purple of mountains and the woolly green of trees. As he was very well off he was able to indulge his hobby, and the contacts with myself were so rare that I was thrown almost entirely into the company of my aunt. But I do remember that once in defiance of his orders I stuck a metal ring on my finger and it refused to budge. My uncle said he would have to file it off, but before beginning the operation he informed me that as soon as the ring was off he would box my ears. This he did, and I was too astounded to howl, for it was the first time in my life that I had ever been punished.

My aunt spoiled me, and the succession of nurse and other maids was doubtless due to her supporting me in my tantrums. For I was a most unpleasant child. When I expressed a wish to sail my boats, a large bath of water had to be brought to dining- or drawing-room. Each Saturday morning I was taken for a walk to a special toy-shop and a new toy would be bought for me, and if it was not the one I had chosen for myself, then I would yell lustily all the way home. Another recollection was of my mother paying one of her rare visits to town and bringing my eldest sister to see me. I took her to the bottom of the garden and pushed her, bare legs and all, into a nettle patch. I remember, too, being given a large metal box of chocolates and devouring every single one by myself.

Of my schooling I remember nothing at all, except that very faintly I seem to see a woman leaning over me and teaching me arithmetic, and she was doubtless a visiting governess. But at five I could read fluently, and I would read over and over again the few books that were considered suitable for me. These were, *The Pilgrim's Progress* in an edition with coloured prints, and that I still have, a small illustrated Prayer Bible as it was called, and in which my favourite view was of a wood where bears were gorging themselves on the youths who mocked at the Prophet; and lastly a folio edition

of Josephus's *History of the Jews*. This had steel engravings, and I had two favourites. One was Joshua surrounded by mailed Hebrew warriors and shaking an admonitory spear at the sun, and the other was a room in Jerusalem during the siege, and two emaciated mothers removing the lid from a cooking-pot and revealing a nicely done baby.

I was gifted with the most amazing memory, so that to read a thing twice was to have it almost permanently by heart. I claim no credit for a gift of the existence of which I was for long unaware, and I give an example only to show how freakish it was. The Bible and Bunyan I knew by heart in all my favourite parts, and when my aunt entertained ladies of her acquaintance she would have me brought downstairs for exhibition. On one such occasion I was asked the various blessings that Jacob bestowed on his sons, and I gave them so pat that I was presented with a threepenny piece. In fairness to myself I should say that I resented these cross-examinations and hated being petted and fussed over, and my only wish was to get back to my room, my book and my toys, and my own way.

The one book I wanted to read was Bunyan's *Holy War*, and because I once stole a look at it and saw its thrilling pictures. But for some reason or other it was considered unsuitable for me and was kept in a locked bookcase, in the lock of which, however, the key was always visible. So I took it when an occasion offered itself and kept it hidden in my bedroom. It was only when I had it, too, almost by heart that I panicked lest the removal should be discovered, so I thrust it as far up the bedroom chimney as my small arm would go, and there it doubtless is at this day.

Of my aunt I do not remember much. I know that she was short and dumpy and had no lap, and when she hoisted me to her knees where I was surrounded by black beads and bugles, it was only her arm that kept me from sliding to the floor. But I do remember her taking my part when I had in some way especially exasperated my uncle, but never do I recall from her a word of correction or reproof. For what jail or gallows I was heading I fear to think, but a tremendous change was at hand.

My uncle's money came from interests in the skin and leather business, but an influx of Polish Jews had heavily undercut the markets and his own firm was in a bad financial

way I remember that we moved into a small house and some of the more elaborate furniture was sold. Then things got worse and my father advised a move to the country, where the cost of living would be infinitely less. It was to the Norfolk village of Fenwold that we went. I was just over seven then and we were there for almost a year. But financial difficulties increased and my aunt came to two decisions that were vitally to change my life. The truth was that she was as much out of place in a village as a modern evacuee, but her reasons for returning to London were that there she could keep a closer eye on things. But that return to London meant my return to Heathley, for there was now no money for the elaborate education that had been planned for me.

But before these things happened, my first real education had begun. I was sent to the local school, if as a somewhat favoured pupil, and there the Fauntleroy in me received a good many surprises. Fauntleroy is not too bad a name, for the only photograph I have seen of myself at that time shows me dressed in a velvet suit of warm brown with huge pearl buttons and a lace Vandyke collar. But at that school there was a boy who terrified me, for he was always exhibiting an open shut-knife and threatening to cut out my heart, and even if he had no exquisite reasons, I have no doubt he had reasons good enough. Then another boy gave me a bloody nose because I insisted that my uncle had more money than anyone in Fenwold. The only other thing I remember is an inspection of the school and my class being asked questions in Scripture. That became a conversation between me and the amazed Inspector, and even to-day I can't help chuckling at the stupefaction that must have been caused by my Biblical erudition.

At last, however, came a certain Sunday and my father drove over early from Heathley, which was some fifteen miles away. My small box had been packed and after tea I departed. My aunt wept as she hugged me to herself for the last time, but of the farewell with my uncle I remember nothing, for I was impatient to be gone. Then off went the cart in the cool of a perfect July evening, and I was alone with my father. I remember the awe with which I regarded him, and the strange smell of his clothes.

Fenwold is too far from actual Breckland for me to have seen its heaths and bracks, but soon we were coming to what was for me a wild and wonderful land. So much was I a

child of the town that when we first came to Fenwold I asked what were those things that grew on a tree at the end of the lawn. When I was told they were apples I did not believe it. Apples for me were things sold in shops. In Fenwold, however, I had learned to recognize the various crops and had seen a haysel and a harvest, and each was a discovery and experience of enormous moment. But the country to which we came that night was a something beyond all experience. Here was a vast region of heather and waving bracken interspersed with woods, and in the distances the faint blue of low hills more enticing than the picture of the Delectable Mountains. Soon the tall bracken was brushing the very wheels of the cart and I could reach over and pull at the sprays.

'Aren't they lovely ferns?' I said. My aunt had been partial to ferns.

'They're not ferns,' my father said, and gave his chuckling laugh. 'Brakes. That's what we call them. Brakes. And don't you pull at them with your fingers or you'll get cut.'

We went across the great heaths and began breasting the rise towards the Hareborough-Ouseland Road, and then we came to a great stretch of heather backed by brakes and woods. At our coming rabbits rose like a gigantic flock of tiny sheep, their white scuts visible to the last as they reached the bracken or made for their holes and the endless silver sand of their multitudinous burrows. I was entranced for I had had a pet rabbit at Fenwold, and then as we drew near the Peddars' Way I saw a something that made me sit up on the hard seat.

'Oh, look! A black rabbit!'

'Plenty of them all round here,' my father said, and the moment marked the beginning of an epoch, for there began my education in local topography and history. That part of the heath, my father said, was called Black Rabbit Warren. When he was a boy there was a craze for silver fur, and some enterprising firm with more optimism and money than knowledge of the rabbit acquired a square mile of heath, dug a ditch round it and raised a rampart that was fenced with small meshed wire, and then put in that huge enclosure some hundreds of silver-grey rabbits. But the fashion went quickly as fashions will, and already the rabbits had burrowed beneath the wire and had mingled with the grey rabbits of the open heaths, so that the original strain was soon lost and

the offspring were of every colour of skin and texture / very few years and those rabbits had scattered all over the corner of Breckland

I remember that talk as if it were only last night. When my father was in a genial or expansive mood he would talk to us children as if we were grown-ups, and his store of local knowledge was vast. When my brother went away, which was not long after, it was I who most often accompanied him on his rides and walks, and I became, queerly enough, something of a confidant. He himself had been the youngest son of a yeoman farmer and maybe he was already planning that I should receive his own inheritance of political thought and Breckland history. But I do know that he had the knack of simple and yet vivid speech and gesture, so that his small listeners would sit wide-eyed and fearing to miss a word.

But now I particularly recall the beauty of that evening, the sky all luminous and flecking the bracken tips to gold and lending a scarlet-orange to the red gnarled trunks of ancient pines. I remember the criss-cross of sun and shadow when at last we came to the Wortley Road, and how dusk was near and the chill that came of a sudden beneath the dense branches of the oaks that made that peaceful lane a natural cloister. Then my father was pointing across the meadows and saying that the buildings were West Farm, and then almost at once the horse was stopping before the door of a house. My mother was there and it was she who lifted my stiff little body to the ground. Little Lord Fauntleroy had come home.

My brother and sisters were in bed and it was not till breakfast the next morning that they saw me. The meal was at half-past seven and I know I resented being made to rise so early and when I still wanted to sleep, for with my aunt breakfast had been much nearer nine. I remember well that first meal and how I was stared at, and my accent giggled at, and how at last I burst into tears.

'Get on with your breakfast, boy, and don't be 'such a great gawk,' was all the sympathy I got from my father.

My mother upbraided the children and explained about differences of accent. She herself was careful of speech and hated the Breckland accent and dialect.

'They'll learn soon enough,' my father told her gruffly. 'And so'll he too.'

Never was a prophecy so soon fulfilled That afternoon my father had business at the Top Breck which lies in the heart of our heaths north-west of Cranberry, and my brother and I were allowed to go with him in the cart That afternoon I saw the loveliest of the heath country, and there for the rest of my life was my favourite haunt But as we made a slow way across grassy tracks which for years had been so little used that the bracken covered them, my father had at times to set a course by guess and by God Then when at last we came beneath the low culvert of the single-track railway and out to the breck, the horse was tied up by the already crumbling barn and we boys were left to our own devices

My brother was friendly in an aloof kind of way He showed me a crab-apple tree in a hedge and a field of peas on the breck edge, and he found a yellow-hammer's nest in some whins Then from the height of land he showed me Top-leigh Watering The sun lighted the silver streaks where waterfowl skimmed across the great mere and turned to gold and rich brown the rushes and reeds that encircled its banks The dense woods that backed it made a green mysterious rampart, and here and there was the red of heather, the green of bracken, and the flaming yellow of canker-weed To me that was an enchanted spot and I announced my intention of going there at once Except to say that it was a mile away, my brother made no comment

Then my father's voice was heard from the barn

'Come on, you boys! Time to go home'

My brother set off, gave a queer look back, and then was running towards the cart I was already on my way to the Watering, and by the nearest route straight across the open breck I had gone a couple of hundred yards perhaps, and then something happened There was a queer swish and a sting in my leg, and when I looked round there was my father, a whip in his hand At once I turned and was running like a deer towards the distant cart, but that inexorable whip was always behind me and its lash caught bare legs and backside and I yelled as I ran My father said never a word till we were at the cart

'Get in,' he told me curtly 'Next time I give you an order, perhaps you'll do as you're told'

My brother, only mildly interested, made room for me on the seat



'And stop that whimpering,' my father went on, and stopped it at once

Never was a lesson so quickly learned. From that afternoon I jumped when my father gave an order. The threat of being reported to him was sufficient to make me obey my mother. But though that family of hers was too numerous and anxious a brood for her to have had a favourite, I always think she had a special corner of her heart for me. She was London born and had never settled to the ways of Breckland, and to her maybe I was something of the city she had irretrievably lost. Perhaps, too, my return home was as if she had given birth to me again, but whether or not those things are right—and to her I have never spoken of them—I do know that she hid many of my misdeeds from my father and smoothed the way for my acceptance by the family.

Discipline was rigid and mercifully prompt. To-day it might be considered inhumane, and my mother would hide herself in some far corner of the house so as not to hear our yells. A pliant stick or the dog-whip was my father's weapon, but his hand must have fallen less heavily than we imagined for it was rarely that we could exhibit a weal. And there were no gradations of justice for we received much the same punishment for all our crimes, and whether of omission or commission, breaking bounds, it might be, or the shirking of some task, or complaints from school or neighbours. But the really queer thing was that before I had been back in the village a year, I had surpassed my brother in the ingenuity of enterprise. Breckland for me was adventure and no bounds could stay me.

Maybe health and hygiene were also a matter of by guess and by God. We knew nothing of vitamins and dietetics and yet I never remember a doctor attending one of us. Nor were we consulted about food. What was on the table we ate. If a first course was not finished, then there was no second. Meal was no time for talk. Our business at table was to eat, and while our parents talked, we listened. As for our leisure, that was rare except in holidays, and the first week of my coming home I was given set jobs on farm and garden, and that harvest I pulled a drag-rake. And there were no rewards for work except the vague promise of a some-day trip to Yarmouth. Work was an accepted thing and individual duties became inseparable from one's self.

Before the harvest was over I had become a part of the family. I obeyed orders, learned to share my possessions and windfalls, could hold my own with my brother and, above all, I had learned the folly of lying or denial. If I had done something and my father said to me, 'Did you do so-and-so?' I would promptly say, 'Yes, father.' Then I took what as promptly came to me, but I learnt, too, that the truth often paid a kind of compensatory discount, for he would often give such credit for the truth as to spare the punishment.

But though I was of the family I was also always curiously apart, for my whole background and my way of looking at things was vastly different, and it was years before their commonplaces had ceased to be for me both experience and wonder. I was always, too, more self-contained and aloof. Those years in London in the company of two elderly people had made me a lonely and a somewhat precocious child, and even in Breckland I retained interests which none could share. Books I devoured, and I was not gregarious. My idea of perfect happiness was when I had an hour or two of my own and could take my book to the heath and lie hidden in the bracken or on the needles beneath a clump of pines.

My London refinements of speech soon went and within a year I was speaking a dialect that brought pained reproofs from my mother. Even to this day I claim that were I not to shave for a week and were then to don an old suit and muffler, I could pass in a pub for a drover or dealer. I take a pride in that. No man, as I see it, is of his county or shire who has not in him the love and sense of the speech of his common folk. Let him keep his English for those who expect it, as he does a best suit, but among his neighbours and those whose roots, like his, run deep in native soil, let him speak as they do and feel a pride in the occasion.

When discipline was relaxed and we were virtuous from a spell of well-doing, home for us children was a lovely place. We were hospitable people and it was rarely on winter nights that some neighbour did not drop in. My brother and I were allowed to stay up later than the girls, and when we at last went to bed we could still hear each word from downstairs, for our room lay above the living-room. Quiet old Ben Dew came in every night when he was in charge of the woods, and Peacock was regular, and Charlie Matthews with his infectious laugh, the mere sound of which made us wriggle

in our seats with a kind of cosy happiness. As for the talk, that was nearly always on local affairs, past history or present politics, with tales of men dead long ago and remembered only in the minds of those who told of them. Perhaps it was politics that were mostly talked, for my father was a Radical who was always seeking occasions to speak his mind without fear, and for that reason died a poorer man. To be a Liberal in those days was to have a certain way of political thought, to be a Radical was to be not passive but active, and very much of a menace. Conservatives—the Tories as we contemptuously called them—were subtle enough in that creation of a Radical bogey and in tacking it occasionally to the coat-tails of Atheism. The same dexterity would later make Labour into Socialism, and the Republicans of Spain into Reds.

But whatever the talk, and long after my brother was asleep, my ears would be strained to listen. And if no neighbour came in, and my father had finished his reading of the weekly paper, then he would talk to my brother and me. From those evenings I learned local history and even geography, and got my first insight into the, for us, vital and eternal problem of what came under the rough and ready heading of Church and State. Which, being interpreted, is Parson and Squire.

Such, very briefly, was my education and upbringing, for it was things like those evening talks that educated and formed me rather than what was learned in the schools. And I would never have related them if it had not seemed essential that you should examine my bona fides and form your own idea of my qualifications for describing our corner of Breckland. I would also wish to give credit where it is due. To my father, for instance.

Though I rarely recall feeling for him the faintest glow of affection—remembrances of stern discipline were always too near for that—I was proud of his bodily strength and admired and envied his vast knowledge. Only in later years did I appreciate how varied and full that knowledge was. Given an urgent cause he could become a village Hampden, and only a fierce and ironic scorn of local time-servers and a mistrust of those professedly as progressive as himself, kept him from becoming a force in local politics. As for Breckland, he knew each hidden path and way, and in the dark he could find a track in the lonely places where few of his contemporaries

had ever ventured by daylight. He knew the history of each villager for generations back, for his father had been a man like himself.

That with all his outspokenness he was devious and even at times a disregarder of the law was undeniable, but in those days a man had to walk both warily and craftily, and where he is denied what he esteems and feels his rights, he will take them by his own means, and in spite of the laws of those whom he regards as privileged. He was a man, too, of welling and impatient energy, ingeniously inventive in mind and yet curiously attracted by the fleeting and even meretricious, so that he would often waste time over what my mother thought trifles and trivialities, and the house would be so littered with bills that she would hide herself to avoid the importunate calls of those who came, and generally vainly, to collect them.

Of my father you will hear more, but there he must be left, for it is high time we took a closer look at Breckland.





## *Chapter II*

### THE SCENE

I MUST ask the reader's patience for the space of a brief chapter, and perhaps in his own interest, for it is necessary that he should form a sound idea of the nature of strange country and learn his landmarks and have his ears somewhat attuned to its speech

I have many times been asked if the Breckland of my novels is a real or an imaginary locality. The question has never aroused an impatience, for Norfolk, in which Breckland mainly lies, has always been a lonely and somewhat neglected corner of England, and Breckland, even to the rest of the county's inhabitants, an unknown part of it. Look at your map and you will see how the great arteries of road and rail go by it to the North, leaving it aside. To history it has furnished little spectacular beyond Nelson, except such oddments as Kett's Rebellion, Thomas Paine, Joseph Arch, Abraham Lincoln, who was of Norfolk stock, and, in later days, admirals like Wilson and Fisher. Even our ancient dialect has not brought us lucrative occupation as music-hall comedians, and the B B C, in its fantastic representations of the humorous side of rustic England, has not thought us worthy of inclusion in their grotesque galleys. We were for long a forgotten county and almost dead, indeed there have been times when we have been both damned and disregarded.

Norfolk, too, is a large county with varieties of scenery, and to be familiar with all of it is to know much. Some judge us by the Broad, and most by the flatness of the Fens. Some

think us a kind of Sandringham of mild undulations and endless plantations of young fir. Some may even think us a kind of extension of Yarmouth, but this I do know, that I have never met a stranger who knew Breckland. But some years before this war my heart rejoiced to see a map of it in an A A guide and the injunction that it should not be missed.

Breckland is real enough and there is more of it than in my early youth, for it is a growing thing, even if the growth is very much of a menace. It lies in south-west Norfolk, north-west Suffolk and mid-east Cambridgeshire, and occupies an area of some hundreds of square miles. If you make the train journey from London to Norwich via Ely you will see its beginnings at Brandon and it will be with you for twenty more miles. If you motor to Norwich via Newmarket you will pick it up there and you will see patches of it as far as to Barton Mills. If there you take the left fork for Swaffham it will be with you for miles, and if you go straight on there will be twenty miles of it, and even then you will have seen only a small part and that the least interesting.

There are three constituents of Breckland: woods, heaths, and brecks. The woods are generally oaks though there is much ancient pine and young plantations of spruce and fir. As for the difference between a breck and a heath, this is my private view and many will not agree. To me a heath is bracken covered, with wide stretches of heather. Its trees are silver birch, with which there is nothing more lovely against the blue of an April sky. Here and there are depressions, rain-filled in winter and dry in summer, and then their beds are mossy and an incredible green. But a breck is arid land, dry, sandy and stony, the haunt of lapwing and curlew. There is sometimes gorse there but the prevailing hue is grey or pale blue from its lichens or the stunted bugloss. Yellow canker-weed grows in masses, and there is the claret red of Ragged Robin. And generally the land of both heath and breck is slightly undulating so that you cannot see beyond a rise, and yet all lies strangely open to air and sky. Its lonely roads, flinty and white with marl, run in the clear with no hedges, though the bracken will often brush the wheels of a cart. To the rabbit, heath and breck are one, for it swarms everywhere, and the silver of the sandy burrows harmonizes with the red of heather, the fresh green of growing bracken, and the evanescent greys of open brecks.

It is not only in summer that Breckland has that rare, wild beauty. In winter there are many who think it lovelier still. Young plantations and pine clumps are still green and the heather still red. The tracery of oaks has always a loveliness of its own and through the leafless woods at the height of a man's eyes there are vistas unseen in summer. As for the bracken there is the sepia of the already dead and the hectic red and rich yellow of the dying. On a morning of hard frost when the sun gleams from an unclouded sky, the colour is riotous beyond belief.

It is a country that is also unbelievably secluded. Some years ago a London man was staying with me and out of an argument came the challenge that I would take him for a day's walk and we should not meet half a dozen souls. The challenge was accepted, for it was clear that in the twentieth century such a thing could never happen. However, we took our food and set off one fine August morning. I took him by Cranberry to the edge of the Top Breck and so to Topleigh Watering. From there we went along the Peddars' Way—the ancient pilgrim track that leads straight as a taut line from the great abbey of Walsingham to that other great abbey at Bury St Edmunds—and then we took a track to Smokers Hole. We crossed the main road towards the Toftwolds and then had lunch, and why we had lunch at that particular place will be told in another chapter. Next we swung round to Langmere and across the Peddars' Way again and so to Illboro Heath. Illboro village was circled and we came back to Heathley by Little Heathley Road. Never once did we use other than a hard road or a defined track and yet we saw only one living soul—a roadman cracking flints on a heap beyond Smokers Hole.

To me the beauty of Breckland is something unique and curiously intimate. But since I may be biased I will tell you of an experience.

When I was a young man and home on leave I was walking one early summer day towards my favourite Top Breck when I spied what looked at a distance like a queer and monstrous mushroom. I went to explore and found it to be a painter's umbrella and the artist at work beneath it. I didn't commit the *gaucherie* of announcing that I was a dabbler myself—a liking, by the way, that I inherited from my uncle—but I did ask permission to watch and said I would be no nuisance,

and the artist rather gruffly told me I could sit by him on the dry heath grass. But soon he fell to questioning me about Breckland and I told him much that seemed to interest for he set brush and box aside and gave himself up to talk. He told me he had travelled in many countries and that now by sheer chance had discovered the loveliest of them all. He spent a month there, I was later told, and I learned that his name was Sir Alfred East. I know that in these days of changed artistic values, and indeed perceptions, the opinion of one so famous then may now count as little, but at least it is worth far more than my own.

Among all this colourful aridity of Breckland lie many oases. There are the hamlets, fighting a losing battle against the insidious onslaughts of both rabbits and bracken. There are also scores of lonely farms and homesteads, though in the past fifty years many have been swallowed up and have vanished. That evening when I came home to Heathley from Fenwold my father waved a hand at the heaths around the Black Rabbit Warren.

'Under cultivation all that land was, and in my father's time. I remember him bringing me here when I was a little tot not as big as yourself and the stacks stood up as thick as the fingers of your hand.'

I can still see him cluster his fingers and hold them up. And the same is now true of all that land, now breck, around the Top Breck and to the east of Cranberry.

'Great fields of corn and wheat and roots there were in my father's time,' my father once told me. 'Those were the bad old days when labourers got eight shillings a week and some less. One day he was driving his old pony up here and he caught sight of a lot of things like master<sup>1</sup> great rabbits getting up from a field and running out of sight to yon far hedge. He was a curious man, like me, so he stirred on the old pony and drove up to see. There used to be a row of cottages there in those days but they've gone long since, but when he got there, what do you think them rabbits were? Children, all in rags and tatters and some with no boots nor nothing. They were so starved and hungry they used to swarm out on the fields and fill their bellies with turnips, and when they saw him coming they thought he was the squire.'

All that barren, lovely land has grown then not because of

<sup>1</sup> Tremendous



that slick economic device, the vicious circle, but from an accumulation of events. Agricultural depressions and often the greed and avarice of landlords starved out the labourer and scattered his children. Cultivation became hurried and skimped and the poorer fields were abandoned. Where land was low-lying, labour and money were stinted on ditching and hedging and then ironically enough the swamps and marshes were preserved as making fine sport for a duck-shooting landlord. The Game Laws forbade entry to woods to keep down the rabbits in their best strongholds, and as heath farms were generally encircled by woods, the rabbit was virtually encouraged to devour. And where the rabbit gets a hold, the bracken follows.

When I was a tiny boy I drove with my father to a certain farm where he was proposing to buy a horse and there I saw something I shall never forget. There was a field of barley, ten acres maybe, and all round that field was a strip or band of nothing, for the rabbits had devoured every green thing. Next came a band where the ears had gone but the stalks were left to about a foot high. Then came a band where there were a few ears and lastly a kind of central island where about half an acre was worth the mowing. Before harvest, the farmer remarked philosophically, the rabbits would have that too. He scraped a living by horse-breeding, buying up lame and greasy footed mares for a song and using a good sire.

Then there was Cranberry, which Rewell farmed in my young days. Even my boy's mind could not fathom one problem in the economics of Cranberry.

'But if the rabbits eat all his corn, father, how does he live?' was what I wanted to know.

'Well, the rent's practically nothing,' my father told me guardedly. 'They'd never let a place like that at all if the rent was anything. Then it'd get all grown over and spoil the shooting.'

He went on to explain that the arable fields, high and dry, were fine partridge land, and pheasants, reared round the keeper's cottage, haunted the autumn stubbles.

'Yes, but what does he live on?' I still wanted to know.

My father gave that sideways nod of his, which was something of a wink.

'Plenty of pheasants, aren't there, son?' Well, the Squire don't get all of 'em.'

Rewell was lucky. He did contrive to make some sort of a living for a good few years, and by working from dawn to dusk and later on seven days a week, even if much of his daily bread was earned by night. Others were less fortunate, adaptable, or daring. Scattered about the great heaths are ruins that once were buildings and the homes of labourers, but they are hard to find or even to discern when almost found. The bracken covers them, and canker-weed, and the endless burrows of rabbits have made what were once their gardens an indistinguishable part of the open heath.

Heathley, the subject of this book, was the most important of the Breckland villages of the south-west of the county, and its situation is somewhat unique, for it stands with its shoulders humped, as it were, into and against the oncoming bracken, but its front door looks on the open east. But I am here speaking of fifty years ago. Then the fields east of the railway were free from the more settled bracken, and great stacks of corn stood in autumn at the end of the Puddledock track. Twenty years ago those fields were virtually out of cultivation, and now the Forestry Commission has taken them over and hundreds of acres more.

According to Blomefield's rare history of the county, Little Heathley was once a suburb hamlet with its own church, but now it consists only of a superior kind of dwelling-house used as a subsidiary Hall, and a farm and one or two cottages. In Tudor times the population of the whole village was in the neighbourhood of a thousand, in my grandfather's time it was still a flourishing place with two annual markets and various fairs, and a population of about seven hundred. Fifty years ago the population was about five hundred, and to-day it is probably less than three.

It is fifty years ago and with the aid of the map I would like you to make a quick tour of the village, so that when people and places are later met they will be less strange. The first thing that strikes one is that woods are everywhere along its lanes, so that it is a green village and a shady one. Its cottages and farms—thatched, or roofed with slate or wide tiles—are generally of clay-lump, though a few are of flint. Perhaps you do not know what clay-lump is.

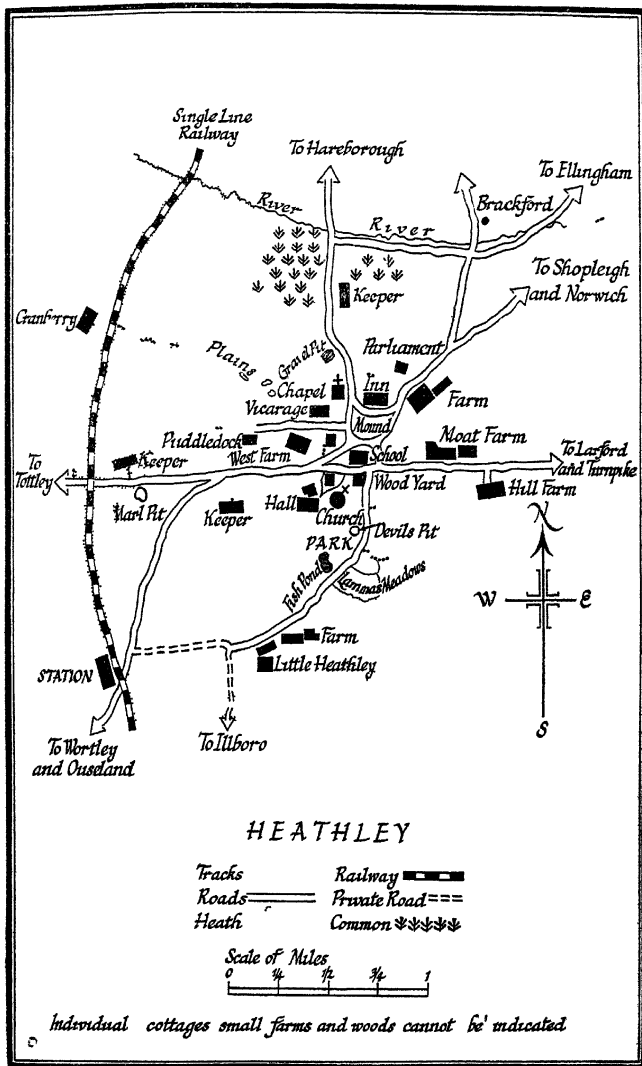
Only some twenty years ago I made many hundred and in the approved fashion, for my foreman had made thousands

in his vouth First a pit—by which we mean a pond or pool—is cleaned out and its clay-bed spread Into it is put coarse sedge and then the whole wet mass is kneaded by the feet of a horse walking round and round on a lead tethered to a central pole Then the mixture is put into wooden moulds which are about twenty inches by twelve by nine When the sun has partly set the lumps they are shaken out and stacked to dry further, and then are ready for building The same mixture that made the lumps serves as mortar, and the process as you will have gathered, is the making of bricks with straw which was the task of Israel in Egypt

The size and weight of the lumps makes for hard work in rearing but building can be done with incredible speed A clay-lump house, too, is warm in winter and cool in summer, or so it is said But most of the labour comes when the walls are erected, for they are then covered with plaster and finally coloured with a rather ugly pink wash It is always the plaster that contrives to crack and break away, and then if there is the least neglect the weather makes an entry and the clay-lumps disintegrate But I found that a far better way was to build and finish off with care, and then tar the wall twice When the second coat is still wet it can be faced with thrown grit or gritty silver sand, which is less unsightly and infinitely more serviceable

Those then are the kind of cottages and farms and buildings you will see on this tour of fifty years ago In the centre of the village is a huge hour-glass, lying on its side and heading north-east The lower half is the school and the upper the village green, known as the Mound The Mound is the hub of village life even if its name is misleading, for it rises no more than four foot from the roads that encircle it Its centre is worn bare, with grass round its edges only, for since there is no playground it is there that the schoolchildren must play In shape it is roughly oval and about sixty yards by fifty Round its edges are great trees through which can be seen cottages to the east and the sprawling buildings of the *Lawn* to the north

From the Mound there is a choice of every way and we head north along Hareborough Road A short way on past William Cash's shop is a fork and that to the left is Vicarage Road Houses are everywhere along it and on the right is the Georgian vicarage, well back from the road and



approached by a short drive To the left is a path that runs by Josh Till's cottage across Stile Meadow to Wortley Road and so by a private road to Hall and church Farther on to the left is West Farm with its vast barn and buildings A few years ago the mill was still there and in my grandfather's time he could look from his window in early morning and count seventy men and boys on their way to work Now—which is as always fifty years ago—there are perhaps ten

Passing the fields before Puddledock we come to another fork To the right a grassy track, known as the Drove, leads to the Plains with their rough grazing for sheep, their shallow pools, stretches of gorse and then their bracken and heaths Past the buildings and cottages known as Puddledock the main road becomes a track and then peters out altogether in the middle of the sparsely cultivated brecks

We go back to William Cash's tailor's shop and head north again along the Hareborough Road The last cottage is that of John Balfour, the schoolmaster, and then comes the chapel Then there is nothing but fields till we come to the keeper's cottage opposite the Common The Common is a good many acres, and its grazing is let Old women go there and cut dead furze and wheel it home in barrows or home-made carts, and in winter we skate and slide on its many ponds So to the Brackford brook and on the right the one lane in all Breckland that should never be missed

The mile or so of its length is along a little valley To each side of it the tiny cultivated fields and meadows slope down, and close along it runs the shallow brook with its many low bridges that lead to its few cottages and farms So rare is the traffic that it is more track than road, and in summer its air is heavy with meadowsweet and honeysuckle In its hedges are many fruit trees and in autumn the bullaces hang like grapes above the brook Kingfishers flash blue by the willows and the voles sit careless by the mud of their holes

Even as a boy that lane and brook and valley would remind me of that pleasant secluded valley of which Great-heart spoke to Mercy, how that the King had his country seat there and loved to walk in its gardens and meadows and orchards and to find the air pleasant But that first little farm there has also an unusual and tragic memory Aaron Rewell, brother of the Cranberry farmer, offered us bullaces and one November afternoon a sister and I went to gather them We were very

near the house and all at once we heard the sound of a crash. Cautiously we went to explore, and then were running terrified for help. For Aaron had fallen from the landing and he lay at the foot of the rickety stairs with a broken neck.

At the end of the lane is a T-head. To the left is Brackford village, and one very large farm. A few years from now that farmhouse will become one of the finest Tudor houses in England, and one day Winston Churchill will sit by its moat and paint the gardens and the house. The story of that house has some bearing on this book, so I move on for a few years and you can sit on the bank and listen.

A certain Colonel Pewtrance bought that farm because he saw its potentialities. Specialists came down for survey and consultation and finally at a cost of many thousands of pounds the great house was lovingly and faithfully restored. But Pewtrance's ambitions did not end there. He had acquired the whole estate and he wished to make its far bounds defined and hem in his rabbits and game. His scheme was to fence in, and particularly along the Peddars' Way, the whole of Brackford Heath with oak posts and split oak pales. The project was to be self-supporting to the extent that his own trees were to be felled and cut up at a special saw-mill made on the site. The cost was very great. The Yarmouth man who rived the paling was paid the then colossal sum of two pounds a week, and he and other men were working there for months.

Then Pewtrance went bankrupt, and thereby will hang a good story. As for his fence, the rabbits at once began burrowing beneath its posts, and they sagged and fell, and whole stretches of paling with them. For years afterwards the neighbouring hamlets plundered it for timber as the Arabs of North Africa plundered the monuments of Rome. Once, before leaving for the South of France, I gave an order for a double sty to be built in my orchard. When I returned many weeks later the sty was built and sows were in it. I paid the bill and only later did some of the timber look strangely familiar. But I asked no questions.

We have spent a long time in Brackford Lane but it is Heathley's favourite walk on a Sunday, and the right turn from where we are will bring us back to Heathley by the Shopleigh Road. As we enter the village we see a narrow track on the right, and that leads to the cottages known as

Parliament The name goes back only to my grandfather's days, for on Sunday mornings he would take the weekly paper there and read it aloud to all who cared to assemble. Even now in the nineties there are many who can neither read nor write, and the preachers at the chapel will read out a hymn verse by verse for the sake of those to whom a book would be useless.

From the school, which even if surrounded by posts and a double iron rail, is considered badly sited and a fast horse and trap a danger to children, there is again a choice of ways. The Wortley Road is the most frequented for it leads to the railway station. That at Harford, on the main line, is four miles away and only a fast trotting nag can do it in twenty minutes, but Wortley Station is only two miles, and good going.

The road, as you may recall from my first sight of it, is arched by trees like the roof of a cathedral, and there are woods and parkland on its left for the first mile of its length. Just past the school a side road to the left runs to church and Hall, and farther on is the private road. Then until Wortley Station there is never a house. But if at the mile fork we had gone straight on towards Cranberry, the road would have been rough and petered out to a sandy track. And its hedges would have disappeared by the time we came to the drift that leads to a keeper's cottage and the cleared space where pheasants are reared.

Back at the school we turn left for the Harford Road. First is the great wood-yard with its estate office and the house of George Spline the foreman. Here we turn right and move along Little Heathley Lane. To its right is the great stretch of the Park, where the Flower Show is held and cricket played, and in the far distance can be seen the stone-coloured Georgian Hall. By the Devil's Pit-hole, which is a grassy hollow, a stile is at a path to the Hall and opposite it to the left is a track to Hill Farm. Farther on, and surrounded by woods, are Lammas Meadows which we farm. Then there is nothing but Park and woods and fields till we come to the remnants of what was once the hamlet of Little Heathley. A private road leads west to Wortley Station and to the south is the Illboro track. There is another track, known to only a few, and of that we shall hear more later.

Back again at the school we go due east along Harford

Road After several cottages we come to Moat Farm, and opposite in the meadows is still the wide ditch that was once a moat and the woods and undergrowth cover the site of what was once a great house As a small boy I made a discovery among that undergrowth nut-bushes that were the descendants of a cob plantation and nuts that were still twice the size of a hedge nut Much farther along is a side road leading to Hill Farm which Wyatt was to make so notable, and after that there is nothing again but fields and woods till the Shopleigh boundary

So much for roads and lanes In the village centre are the four shops Robert Addis's faces the school with its back to the east Just before William Cash's cottage is another general store The post office is in the hour-glass angle and there is a tiny shop and bakery short of John Balfour's cottage There is a shoe-maker opposite the vicarage but there is no butcher Pork is our staple diet, and we call the rest butcher's meat, and it is too dear to be bought except on rare high days and holidays The nearest butcher is six miles away but in a year or two's time a man named Tash will open a shop, to last only a couple of years In that time his living will be chiefly made by dealing in poached rabbits and game, and I shall be one of the providers There are four inns, which we always call pubs, and one, little more than beer-house, will soon be closed down The largest and most pretentious is the *Lion*

Such then is Heathley, self-contained—there is not even a carrier—and still fairly self-important Our living is by the land and those that do not actually work on it, feed us, clothe us, or come in from Hareborough or Ouseland or Harford to bring us into the world or doctor us Most of our bread is home-made, and our eggs, milk, and butter are from the farms Rabbits help out with pork, and we should be ashamed to buy a vegetable or sell one, and however cramped the space between our cottages and the road, we contrive somehow to find room for flowers The old moss-rose is a favourite, and there are some fine bushes in the neglected garden of the ruined thatched cottage that faces William Cash

In our way we like a touch of beauty and though we may miss such niceties as the far blue of a vista, we look up at a fine sunset, if only to forecast the weather And we have old names for old things Dante Gabriel Rossetti invented five names for the handmaidens of the Lady Mary and then called



their sounds five symphonies Our names have no pseudo-medieval lushness but are music for all that Cranberry and Puddledock you know One wood we passed was Big Copses and another Little Foxes, and there is Pinnacle Hill and Scotgate and Bambridge

But the things you have scarcely noticed are those that matter most—the cottages that hug the lanes and roads In them live those who make a village even if they have little hand in its shaping, and it is their votes that determine elections They are of all sorts for this is no idealized village There are god-fearing men and rascals, sober and drunk, legitimate and illegitimate, hardworking and shiftless, the comfortably off and the incredibly poor Women of all sorts too the kindly-spoken and the scandalmongers, the house-proud and the slatterns, a reputed witch and the village prostitute Among them are those who will always linger on the palate of my mind

It seems necessary to mention our way of speech, for where it will be opportune to quote a man, and that will be often, it will be as well to quote him literally

Norfolk speech is blurring and abrupt, unlike that of Suffolk which is a sing-song The final 'g' with participial force is rarely pronounced, and words like *runnin* will be so printed Also a Norfolk man is not fond of a final 's' to mark a third person singular and present He says, 'Here come George,' and not, 'Here comes'

There are other oddities A man is often addressed by a friend or neighbour as *bor* Borrow alludes to the Norfolk *baws*, and he lived long at Dereham You may also remember Dickens's attempts at the dialect in *David Copperfield* When a man says, 'Mornin, George bor,' the *bor* has the force of *old friend Mor*—diminutive of *mawther*—has largely gone out though it was fairly common fifty years ago

Two or three people are collectively addressed as *together* A man meets a neighbour and his wife, or even several friends, and he says, 'Where are you off to, together?'

Once I was walking through the village with a mightily superior young lady from town and we met a village friend of mine The previous night had seen a violent thunderstorm—*tempest*, as we call it—and I hoped its rain had done good to old Dick's garden

'Master<sup>1</sup> tempest, weren't it,' he said 'And didn't it hully<sup>2</sup> rain' Couldn't sleep for't' Then with a glance at my companion 'How'd you sleep together?'

The lady's face flared crimson and even the later explanation was a tricky business

A word too about pronunciation Words with the sound of *urd* are pronounced *ad* A bird is a *bad* and heard, *bad* You may test that knowledge on a true story of a certain farmer's wife, who made considerable pretence of refinement, and was highly unpopular in consequence The farmer had lent a roller to flatten the cricket pitch and the Reverend called to thank him but found him out

'Thank your husband, will you?' he said to the wife 'And tell him it did the job splendidly'

'Yes, sir, I'll tell him,' she said And then with an unhappy attempt to gild the lily 'I hear they made a good job of it They tell me it's flat as a cow's-tad'

For the rest of our speech there are few difficulties An American to whom I told a story in broad Norfolk insisted that he had understood every word, for the speech differed little from that of farming communities of English stock I tried him with the shibboleth that every Norfolk man knows

'D'yar father keep a dickey, bor?'

That had him at a loss but the test was hardly fair All it asks, however, is if your father keeps a donkey I should have puzzled him in earnest if I had asked if he had sin a mawther with a dwile moppin a swidge That's a girl with a house-flannel mopping up a puddle

<sup>1</sup> Tremendous

<sup>2</sup> Wholly Pronounced to rhyme with *fully*





### *Chapter III*

## CHURCH AND STATE

I SHALL not be thought subservient if I begin this history of my early contemporaries with those who were my betters. For betters in many ways they undoubtedly were. No sooner did I come home to Heathley than I was carefully instructed by my mother to raise my cap to both squire and parson. I found nothing irksome in the small courtesy and I invariably found it returned. And I liked both parson and squire for reasons of my own. Never did it occur to me that the fulminations of my father and his underground circle should have in their endless references to Church and State any inclusion of Squire Finch or the Reverend John Pardon.

What did the expression 'Church and State' mean to me as a small boy? This, I think, that it was the policy of land-owners—squires, as we called them—to keep the agricultural labourer in a state of subservience, and principally for the purpose of cheap labour. The methods employed were division of his ranks and an immediate crushing of any attempts to dissipate ignorance, or the claims to free expression of opinion. It was the combination of squires, I was taught, that had defeated the attempt of Joseph Arch to form the first Labourers' Union. Toryism, as I understood it, was merely the same thing under an election name, and the Established Church was the active ally of Squirearchy.

So much for generalities. Under the heading of grievances and injustices might be put the working of the Game Laws, the magistracy as the peculiar perquisite of parson and squire,

the fact that the Church should be State established whereas the Chapel was self-supporting, the burden of tithes and the innumerable bad conditions of both service and housing under which the labourer was forced to live. And since all these things were argued passionately and men risked much for them, it has taken me a considerable time to work out why I, in my small mind as fiercely angered by accounts of injustice and as eager to do something about it, should never have dreamt of considering our own village as under the heel of a tyranny and our Heathley neighbours the slaves of a vicious system. Such tyrannies might happen in nearby parishes but somehow it never occurred to me that they were happening in ours.

Take Wortley, for example, and a happening that was often quoted. A labourer was standing one evening by the Park gate near the school and his headgear was one of those twin-peaked sporting caps which keepers always wore. The parson went by and the man gave him a good-evening. The parson went on and then came back.

'I noticed you didn't touch your cap to me,' he said.

The man gave him a look, and then, I imagine, smiled dryly, as he pulled off his cap and showed it.

'You see this here hat, sir? It used to have two peaks once. I've pulled one on 'em off salutin' you and the squire and I'm damned if I'm a-goin' to pull the t'other one off for nobody!'

The parson reported to the right quarter and the man was sacked straightaway. That meant eviction from his cottage, but good friends were aware of his predicament and he was found work in a village some miles away.

But Wortley was Wortley and Heathley was Heathley. And then within a year or two of my coming home, something did happen which changed everything. That my father might suffer for his Radicalism had never occurred to me, and when it happened it came as very much of a shock. But let me make one thing clear. I still had my affection for the Reverend and my awe of and respect for Squire Finch. It was neither of those who brought home to me the fact that politics were not merely words. It was a newcomer to the village, and for years we were to be that rare anomaly, a village with two squires.

Squire Finch, who owned practically all Heathley, had no

great capital behind him. Rents were necessarily reasonable for the bulk of our land was poor, and as he was a considerate man and in touch with those who lived under him, he kept cottages and buildings in good repair. His income therefore from the village itself was very little, and I doubt if at times it paid its way. What he did then was to let the Hall and the shooting, and with the Hall went Hill Farm. He himself went to live at Little Heathley, and for the farm there he had a steward. The rest of the farms and holdings were let to tenants, though the shooting rights were owned by the Hall.

I might quote rent day as an example of the relations between Squire Finch and his tenants, small and large. On Michaelmas morning old Dick Shaw, his coachman, in livery and top hat with cockade, would drive the Squire down to the office at the wood-yard, and there the tenants would assemble. When the clerk called his name a tenant would walk in. The Squire would shake hands and then ask after his property, and with the head steward for witness. If the man had grievances there might be promises of remedies, or the fallacies in the man's arguments might be gently pointed out. If the Squire himself had complaints, then the man was bluntly told them, for Finch walked regularly about the village and there was little that he missed. Then the tenant would be confirmed in his tenancy, the clerk would read out the amount due, and the tenant would haul his hessian bag from his trouser pocket and the rent would be duly paid. Then a glass of sherry would be poured and the tenant would help himself to a slice of the huge plum cake that stood on the side-table and a shilling or a half-crown would be given back for luck. That last I remember most, for it was always my mother's perquisite.

That had been the ritual of years and it was a bad day for the village when Finch at last had to employ an agent, and a worse when both Hill Farm and West Farm came under that agent's control. But that is another story and it might be better to get back to Squire Finch.

I remember him as a biggish man with a tanned face. His beard was reddish brown and straggly and it failed to conceal the hare-lip that made him talk with a slight lisp and gave his voice the nasal quality which the village found easy to mimic. His dress was always a brown Norfolk jacket with

breeches to match and high spats, and he usually wore a twin-peaked cap. So regular were his walks through the village that men knew when to expect him and activities could be regulated accordingly. 'Here come the Squire!' was a warning that I often heard.

I have said that even to a small urchin like myself he was punctiliously polite, but one special instance remains in my memory. I was at Wortley Station one July morning on my way to Ouseland to school when Shaw drove up with the Squire who was going to London and thence to Norway where he spent a month or so each year. The local train drew in and the stationmaster opened for him the door of a first-class compartment. But the Squire lingered at the door and then beckoned to me, and for the six-mile journey I had the indescribable luxury of a first-class seat. He asked me about myself and my small ambitions, and never once did he attempt to question me about my father or village matters. We talked long about Scott, whose *Fortunes of Nigel* I happened to have in my satchel, and at last when the train reached Ouseland he told me to read all I could, whatever it was, and then sort grain from chaff for myself. Then he gave me a shilling! All that was the mark of a kindly, understanding man, and no wonder it was never in my mind to think of him as a member of that tyrannic Tory clique whose removal was the ultimate objective of our village revolutionaries.

Finch was a widower with a son and a daughter. Of the son we saw little, though he was alluded to as Master Charles, for he was away at school. In those days it was only the sons of squires and parsons who went from us to Public Schools, for the sons of even the wealthiest farmers went to the school in their village and then only rarely to a Grammar School in a nearby town. But young Charles Finch had a fine opinion of himself and one day it received a rude shock.

He was home on holiday and riding about the countryside on his pony. Happening to be at Bullen's Farm which lies along a drift from the Harford road towards the Shopleigh boundary, he tried a short cut by galloping his pony across a field of corn. Bullen saw him and came running furiously to head him off.

'What the hell do you think you're doin'?' And when the pony stopped 'What are you doin on my land? Who are ye?'

'You ought to know who I am,' young Finch told him 'I'm your future squire'

'Future squire be damned,' hollered Bullen 'Get you off that hoss and off my land or I'll put a charge o' shot into ye!'

I doubt if young Finch reported that to his father. If he did, I imagine he was told a few home truths, but in any case Bullen never heard another word on the matter.

The daughter, Miss Flora, was much older, and to my father she was worse than a red rag to a bull. In her little governess cart she would drive about the village, and, according to my father, with her nose in everyone's business but her own. To me she was an inaccessible, petulant sort of person, and the necessarily subservient village, which in its heart of hearts had no use for her, would see the approach of her cart and say, 'Here come Flo!' That she was a busybody and a tale-bearer was undeniable, and the village resented the fact that even at meal-times she would walk unceremoniously into a cottage.

The Hall was in the occupation of a man named Green, a wealthy member of a firm of international bankers, and the village called him Squire Green, with Finch being known simply as 'The Squire'. At the Hall local girls were employed as maids and young men became keepers and gardeners. A great deal of money came into the village, but other things came too—flunkeydom, cliques and cheap social strata, the itch for easy money, graft and favouritism, and even betting, for Green was a racing man.

He was shortish and plump with a face of the most extraordinary pink, and eyes set with good living. His voice was stuttery and rather shrill, and if ever a fish was out of water it was Green in Breckland. Under him the village was virtually in the hands of a hierarchy whose chief members were the head steward, the head keeper, the housekeeper, and the landlord of the *Leon*, which was flunkeydom's main resort in its leisure.

As an instance of Green's utter ignorance of Breckland ways was the dinner he gave for the village on his marriage. His wife, I believe, was French. Now a dinner to us was a midday meal in the school or our great barn, with plenty of potatoes and butcher's meats, and then a good plum duff to follow. But Green had other ideas. The meal was at tables set out on the Hall lawns on a summer evening, and it was

provided and serviced by a Norwich firm of caterers with waiters in full regalia. Every living soul in the village was expected to be there, and the menu, composed of at least six courses with a choice of cold meats, galantines, pies, and various sweets, began with salmon and cucumber, and not the only salmon we knew but middle cut of Scotch salmon at that. To drink were beer, minerals, and endless champagne.

That meal became a riot. Heathley was not used to courses that went beyond two. A suave waiter set a plate of salmon and cucumber before one farmer who promptly asked what it was, and then reckoned he'd have some of that there pie instead. Others, who liked the salmon, would come back to it at the end of the meal, or flit from trifle to galantine and back to trifle again, and altogether that menu became a gastronomic fairyland in which we browsed. The gluttons gorged and guzzled and even the children had their sips of champagne. Dusk was in the sky by the time the meal was at last over and the Reverend appeared to call for three cheers for the married couple. That night many were so drunk that they slept along the twin roads back to the village, and for the first time in all its history there were women who were drunk too. I am no moralist, and thank God, I still have ample vices. I like a drink and a good meal both for myself and my fellows, but I know that that wedding dinner at the Hall did more ultimate harm to Heathley than all those grievances under which it supposedly and actually suffered, and for weeks afterwards the whole place was literally demoralized.

Then came the event to which I have referred and in which my father, and all our family, were vitally concerned. In *In This Valley* I have ascribed the happenings to Abner Webster, but the story perhaps will bear adjustment and restatement.

Field, the head keeper, was on excellent terms with my father for somewhat amusing reasons which you will subsequently learn. Mrs. Field, a character as lovely as any that I have known and for whom I shall always feel both gratitude and affection, was the closest friend my mother had. Her father, of whom also more anon, would come to our house on winter afternoons when he was down on holiday, and play draughts with my mother, and to all us children the Fields were especially kind.

Thanks to Field my father secured a lucrative contract from



Squire Green—nothing less than the annual supplying, mending and replacement of the hundreds of coops and wooden runs used in pheasant rearing. For there was nothing that my father, with a growing family to keep, would turn aside if it promised a reasonable return. I remember how he bought timber in bulk for the work and how a special man was hired to help, and how in the spring the shed where they worked smelt of pine-wood shavings. And that work was certainly a godsend. It enabled my father to set aside work less lucrative and it gave the whole household a financial stability.

Then came a certain election. Wilson—Sir Frederick Wilson—was the Liberal candidate, and Gurdon of the banking firm the Conservative. While the votes were being counted a certain Heathley Radical was in the town, too excited and anxious to wait till the result of the poll reached our distant village. It was he who brought my father private word that Wilson was in, and as he had a dry sense of the ironic, he further spread the rumour that it was Gurdon who was in, a piece of subterfuge that would give him a double victory over the local Tories. He also swore my father to secrecy.

It so happened that afternoon that my father was walking towards Lammas Meadows when he met Squire Green at the stile by the Devil's Pit Hole. Green was in high spirits. Whether or not Field had done some diplomatic lying on my father's behalf I do not know, but Green was definitely under the impression that my father was as rabid a Tory as himself. 'We've won then,' he announced. 'Given the Radicals another damn good hiding.'

My father tumbled to the error and gained his own ironic satisfaction in leaving Green to his mistake.

'Yes, sir. We've won right enough,' he said chuckling in his turn, and Green, still chuckling too, went on his way.

But later my father as often could not keep his tongue quiet. Some informer gave Green news of the trick that had been played and almost at once Field came round to our house. He had bad news. Not while my father lived, Green declared, would he earn another penny from the Hall.

The results were disastrous for us all and it took years to recover from the financial consequences. My father took it all philosophically at first but he was an embittered man.

'Let him keep his work,' he told Field, 'and do you tell him I said so. I lived in this parish before he came and I'll be here when he's forgotten.'

From then on I hated Green with every fibre of my small being. To him I raised no hat and when he was past I would even venture on a scowl or grimace. And I hated the things for which he stood, and his menials and the time-servers who spoke well of him in others' company.

But to another story. It was only a few months after the Green affair that word came to my father that Squire Finch had closed the little-known track across Illboro heath and river that made a short cut of miles towards the Harford turnpike. My father was furious, and my mother alarmed.

'Why should you worry yourself about that?' she said. 'You'll only make more trouble.'

'Worry?' My father stared incredulous. 'Someone's got to do somethin', haven't they?'

'I don't see it,' she said in her quiet way. 'And if something does have to be done, why shouldn't someone else do it? We've suffered enough as it is.'

My father's lip curled contemptuously. He knew that those who spoke loudest did least and that even in the District Council were plenty who were in the pockets of the squires.

'Suppose you make enmity now with Squire Finch,' my mother went on. 'Then he'll take Lammas Meadows away and where shall we be then?'

'Where?' said my father, and glared. 'Where we always were. Where we can get a living in spite of squires and everybody.' His voice rose as it always did when he made his terse and obstinate confession of faith. 'Neither man nor devil am I feered of. What's right is right, and that's that.'

The very next morning he put the horse in the cart and took a man and tools with him to the Illboro track. At the ford the gate was chained and locked as had been reported, so he removed both chain and padlock, saw the gate moving properly on its hinges and then snacked it and drove home. Finch had it fastened again, and again, and for weeks though urgent work had to be set aside, my father cleared the gate and drove his cart through as a personal satisfaction and a sign to any chance watcher that the track had always been public and that so it would remain.

Then Finch gave up the struggle. Maybe he had been misinformed about the track, though I still suspect it was Green who had requested the closing. But Finch took the defeat in perfect temper. There were no recriminations and never a hint that Lammas Meadows was likely to be needed for another tenant. And from those two events one may gather something of the difference between a hireling and a true shepherd. The metaphor is not too apt perhaps, but it should be added that whereas, but for his annual holiday, the Squire was always with us, Green made no winter appearances except for the shoots, and his days were divided between London and Newmarket when he was not at the Hall.

It is hard to appraise what good that tenancy of Hall and shooting did to Heathley itself, but it was far less than one may imagine. The money of employees was spent in the village but that village had never known unemployment in any case, and Green's rates of pay were no higher than his neighbours'. It is true he built a couple of fine cottages but they were for his keepers and far out in the heaths. Perhaps the only additional money that entered the village, for the Hall dealt with London Stores, was at the time of the shoots, and then every available man and boy were mustered for brushing, as we called beating, or to go on-stop, which latter meant taking up a fixed position and driving back the birds that broke away from the beaten line. The pay was half a crown a day and lunch, which was good enough when a labourer got eleven or twelve shillings a week for far longer hours. Boys got a shilling, and it was that sum which attracted me, and, of course, the lunch.

As I persisted in wishing to go on-stop, Field consented one raw January day and I duly took up the position assigned to me and armed myself with a stick. It was cold and slow work but I had that lunch to which to look forward. At last it came and one of the packages was thrust into my hand by the man who bore them round. What I had imagined I do not know, but probably a lunch of the calibre of that celebrated dinner. What I found when I removed the paper wrappings were two huge slabs of bread between which was a slice of very fat and practically raw beef, and my stomach turned at the first sight of it. There was also a slice of cheese and I ate that as it was, for the bread was soaked with blood from the beef.

And to add to the misfortunes of that first and only day's shoot, I was forgotten when the time came to knock off. It was the Illboro side of the estate over which they were shooting and my post was in a ride in the woods that sloped down to the marshes. There I stayed till dusk was near and then decided to disband myself. But I had left it too late and darkness fell. The raw mists of night descended and soon I was lost. I ran and I hollered and at last found myself far away from home on the Illboro road where it nears the main turnpike towards Larford. There I knocked at a cottage door and the kindly couple made me tea and gave me food and then set me on my way. It was very late when at last I reached home. The keepers had been informed and they and my father were out in the mists searching for me. Never had I seen him so pleased as at the sight of me.

There are many stories I could tell of Squire Green and one which I cannot help telling, and my solemn word is pledged that there is no exaggeration.

A maid had broken a window of the study. The butler sent to George Spline, that crony of my father who was in charge of the wood-yard and estate workmen, but George had no glass. Some was expected but had not arrived, so George approached my father. Now my father had been swindled by a travelling salesman over a crate of glass, having been attracted by the very low price and deceived by the fact that whereas the top sheets were of excellent quality, the bottom ones at which he had not looked were cast-offs, awry and distorted.

The good sheets had been used and the rest were in the crate, with my father awaiting a customer who would be a bigger fool than himself. When George came he was given a large sheet and his eyes saw nothing wrong with it, and the french-window was duly repaired. The next morning, a bright November day, Squire Green went to the study after breakfast as was his custom and as he sat there he saw a couple of pheasants moving on the lawn.

But they seemed queerly erratic birds that changed shape in the most peculiar manner and at times there was only one pheasant instead of two. So he got up to investigate and opened the window for a clearer view. Then he saw that instead of two pheasants there was only one hopping thrush. Next he looked through the glass again and at trees fantastic

and weird and monstrous flower-beds that were and were not. Then he uttered a bellow, seized the poker and smashed the french-window to smithereens, and when the frightened butler came running in, ordered him to fetch Spline. What happened then no one ever knew, for Spline told only his own version. But he had to put in a horse and go all the way to Ouseland for new glass. As for my father, he would laugh at that story till the tears ran





#### *Chapter IV*

### CHURCH AND STATE—*continued*

JOHN PARDON—‘the Reverend’ as we all knew him—had been the head master of one of the smaller Public Schools. He was a shortish man but with a fine patrician presence and with manners exquisite and unforced, and when he raised his hat to return my small salute he would do it with the same easy grace as he would have done to a duchess. His silvery beard, trimmed to a point, had streaks of the original gold, and on the rare occasions when we saw him hatless, his hair showed the same golden markings and in some peculiar way it gave his face a rare and elusive distinction. When he walked, idly swishing his stick, his eyes would be on the ground, but every few seconds he would look up, and almost perkily as a blackbird does on a lawn.

The income from the Heathley living was about four hundred pounds but the Reverend had private means. There were usually three maids at the vicarage, and I can still see their pink print dresses and white cuffs, and as they were generally imported they ended as village wives. Wakely Sayer was his coachman-gardener. Like Shaw at Little Heathley, Wake drove abroad in livery and high cockaded hat, and a fine figure of a man he looked as he held the reins and gave a gentle but artistic flick with the silver-mounted whip.

Of the Reverend’s family of four, only a son and a daughter were closely connected with the village. Lancelot—to us Master Lance—was at school on my arrival and shortly

afterwards went up to Cambridge, but on his holidays he made a valuable member of the cricket team. His sister Maud—you will have noticed the influence of Tennyson—played the organ at church and helped generally in church matters. I liked her enormously, for she was friendly and hearty and would hail me from a distance by my Christian name.

But her mother was always for me a terrifying figure and very much of a *grande dame*. Never do I remember to have seen her smile. And she was tall, slow-moving, and superbly poised, and when I met her I could do no more for the life of me than scrape off my cap and mumble a something which I trust she took for a greeting. My mother liked her, however, but as her calls on us were made when the children were at school, we saw little of her. My father disliked her, thinking her a reactionary influence on the Reverend, and he was sure that her calls were for the gleanings of information. There was also the supposition, far from authenticated, that the parish sick received a tin—a round milk-can, that is—of vicarage soup, which seemed to him a renunciation of liberty and self-respect for the sake of Egyptian flesh-pots. I can still see the curl of his lip when it happened to be mentioned that So-and-so was ill—not in the matters, as our expression was.

‘He’ll be all right,’ he would say, ‘as soon as he get some of that vicarage soup into him.’

Of the Reverend’s private charities I know nothing but I do know that he visited the sick of chapel and church alike. As for his sermons, and those I heard for many years if at longer intervals than I ought to confess, they were homely Christian doctrine with subtle touches of scholarship, and they lasted from ten minutes to a quarter of an hour, and that, for a rustic congregation, was the perfect length. I can say, too, that almost all spoke well of him, and that his approach was never announced and avoided as was that of even the Squire. If indeed there is truth in the claim that an established church meant that every village had at least its one gentleman, then Heathley was lucky, for in Finch and Pardon it had two.

The Hall lay some two hundred yards west of the church and a private gate opened on a brick path that led to a private door. In that my father rightly saw some association of Church and State, and also in the fact that between altar and pulpit were private pews unoccupied except by the Finches

on one side or Green and visitors from the Hall on the other

'Why should he sit by himself?' I heard my father once demand, and referring to Green 'If he've an immortal soul, so have all the others that go there, haven't they? And he'll have to answer for himself the same as they will. He won't get no special seat then, will he? Nor no private gate to slip in by neither.'

Another association that would anger him was the fact that on the labourers' only holidays of the whole year—Good Friday and Christmas Day—a condition of the holiday was that the recipient should attend church in the morning. There indeed was damning proof of the unholy alliance, especially as it was said that Flora Finch took notes of the absentees. Of the truth of that latter I cannot speak. As for Pardon's alliances with the Squire or Green to the detriment of Heathley or its interests, I can recall only one instance, and there I prefer to think that in a difficult situation he chose the line of least resistance.

And as chairman of the Parish Council he had a difficult team to handle, as John Balfour, the clerk, was later to tell me. Its four or five members would include a nominee of the Squire and perhaps also of Green, a farmer or two who would sail with the wind, and finally Bradford Billy—that is, William Cash—who was the district's most desperate Radical. But Pardon dined regularly both at Little Heathley and the Hall, and that helped whatever argument my father had in mind.

And yet in his heart of hearts my father liked and admired him. Pardon was for many years captain of our cricket team, and a fine captain and wicket-keeper he was. If by ill chance he was unable to play, my father—himself what might be called a fanatical cricketer—would be in despair.

'Bast the thing!' he would say when he heard the news, and then with a throwing up of hands would give way to despair. 'Might as well all stay at home. What's the good of going over to try and beat So-and-so if the Reverend ain't there?'

And when Master Lance was at home and the news came that he would be playing for us on the Saturday, my father would be all smiles and cock-a-hoop. Lance was a terrifying fast but remarkably erratic bowler—and we pronounced



the word to rhyme with *bowler* When wickets were granite hard and bumpy, he scared out more than he bowled

'Bast! Won't they be hoppin about?' my father would say to me as he visualized the opposing batsman, and his eyes would twinkle and he would give his sideways nod of the head

At the early age of eleven I became a stop-gap member of the team and it was then that I learned to know and adore John Pardon My only assets were that I could hold any catch and was quick in running, and daring on my feet against slow bowling, but small boy though I was I was treated in the team as man and boy alike If I failed there would be neither expostulation nor blame, and whatever was worthy of praise received more than its share The Reverend would see, too, that there was ginger-beer for a boy to drink when the men were at the ale cask and would make sure he had the chance of eating a man's-sized tea

The great thing about the Reverend, and it is something that lies at the roots of the whole of that vague conflict between agricultural communities and the enemy known to me as Church and State, was that he fostered a man's self-respect On the field or in the lanes he would call us—even my father—by our Christian names, and he would take us all into his counsel So whatever scheme we had, it was one which we ourselves had helped to devise, though it might be only for the downfall of a particular batsman or the circumventing of a bowler, and it gave us pride and competence alike No wonder that for years we were a formidable team, yokels and hobbledehoys though for the most part we were Yet when we were in John Pardon's company, if only for a minute, we knew we were men

And therein, to my judgment, can be discerned the damning sin of squirearchy A labourer was ordered, not consulted He did this job and that as part of a routine, and far from initiative being encouraged, it was definitely stifled He was moved arbitrarily from cottage to cottage, and often when his cottage was the Naboth's vineyard of some lickspittle or time-server He was given no credit or reward for brains and no opportunities for self-improvement And after generations of that there is no wonder that men became inarticulate and effortless, and pulled their forelocks to every Jack-in-office

I see John Pardon then as a man among men, commanding

respect from his own innate qualities, and imparting that same respect to those who only in his company were aware that they possessed it. When in Church on Whit Sundays or at a Club dinner he addressed us as, 'Brother Oddfellows,' or 'Brother Foresters,' there was no questioning of the claim or the assertion. And he was a man with no foolish bigotry. When the time came for building a new chapel, and that was just after my arrival in the village, Finch gave a free site, even if my father remarked with his usual bias that it was far enough out of the main village so as not to offend his eyes. Green gave a handsome sum, but his subscriptions to this and that were so monotonous and lavish that they had long ceased to surprise. But of the Reverend little if anything was expected. It is true that in the village there was only a last remnant of hostility or rather of suspicion of Chapel against Church, and that a dim survival of Wesley's days, coupled with the knowledge that if a farm fell vacant a new-comer stood more chance of its tenancy if he were not Chapel. A few old bigots still lingered perhaps who classed the Church with Roman Catholics and even atheists, but when there was talk of venturing to ask the Reverend for a subscription there was in men's mind the hesitant thought that to ask the Church to support the Chapel was scarcely a reasonable proposition. Then after much argument Robert Addis and another chapel stalwart were sent as a deputation. Not only were they courteously received but the amount of the gift was a staggering surprise.

You may by this time be in agreement with the earlier assertion that in Heathley we were fortunate in both parson and squire. Perhaps you accept also the statement that the labouring part of Heathley was inarticulate, stolid and slow-thinking, and if so you will naturally wonder two things—to what extent unspoken injustices were real and how it could be that those who comprised the small underground movement, as I have called it, thought hostility and rebellion worth while. For necessarily they themselves must have had some security or they would not have dared to talk openly and instigate, and when a man is secure himself there must be strong reasons and spiritual urges that lend regard for the security and better-being of his fellows.

But first of all, what were the injustices that were always

present in men's minds? The first, the deepest and yet the most vague, was the ever present knowledge of petty tyrannies in villages nearby, as that which I have related at Wortley. Such things made a kind of pervasion. And there was no doubt that those who were vocal on behalf of squiredom and the system for which it stood did get such few plums as were going. In our village that was definitely the case with those who worked under Green, and it is equally true to assert that few if any were vocal in the opposite direction. One man who lived under Green was deftly ejected for too public an expression of Radical views. He didn't see why this and that should happen was his way of putting it.

At election times, then, the village was smothered with Tory placards and bills in red, which were their local colours. Blues were seen only in the windows of those who did not live under the Squire, as we called it. I remember at that first election—the one that cost my father dear—I was in despair, for all Heathley seemed enthusiastically Tory. At Liberal meetings in the school only a few attended and there would be no enthusiasm. When meetings were outdoors on the Mound, men listened from a distance and made no comments. But when the Tory came the school would be packed, and there would be, "Three cheers for Gurdon!" from Field and others, and cheering and laughter that could be heard far away, and Green himself would probably be in the chair.

Never did I spend so miserable a time, though the chief thing I recall about it to-day is something that seems almost too trifling to record. Helpers were wanted to distribute handbills to outlying cottages and I was a willing volunteer, though chiefly for the sake of the sixpence of reward. Among the literature was a photograph of Gladstone, and the caption "Don't be misled! Follow the Grand Old Man."

That caption puzzled me. Not that part about the Grand Old Man, for we had a huge portrait of Gladstone in our sitting-room. And finally I spoke to my mother?

"Mother, what does the word mizzled mean?"

"Mizzled?" she said. "I never heard of it. How do you spell it?"

I told her, and I shall never forget how she laughed.

Election day came and I was even more in despair. From the Hall, Little Heathley, and Tory farmers came traps, smart dog-carts, and wagonettes to fetch voters from outlying

farms and cottages, and we Liberals could hardly muster a sulky<sup>1</sup> or two. But when the poll was over, my father enlightened me, and with a heartiness that gave even me a confidence.

'Half them that ride in Tory carts and holler for Gurdon are the best Liberals we have,' he told me. 'When the ballot boxes are opened, Heathley's always one of the best we have. Two-thirds Liberal, and I know that for a fact.'

But of those other injustices whose existence was inescapable, the Game Laws were the most resented. Every man-jack of us was a poacher at heart, as southern coast men had been smugglers, and if we were caught our judges were the very squires who maintained the system. When a farmer or smallholder cut his corn, a keeper would be present to see that no game was shot or unduly disturbed. Even hares were classed as game, and in our parts they swarmed by the hundred. If a farmer set foot after rabbits in the woods that hemmed in his land he was guilty of trespass in pursuit, for woods were ground hallowed for the safe laying of pheasants' eggs and the roosting of the grown birds.

It was resentment against such things that Radicals kept alive and that their efforts were not without avail could be seen by the results of elections. For better wages and conditions there was little agitation since there was no union, and all contrived somehow to live, and conditions in Breckland compared not unreasonably with those that prevailed throughout the county. As for those who were the mainstay of that underground movement, who hinted here and dropped a shrewd word there, they were three only, and each was a man of outstanding personality.

I begin with my father because of him you have already heard. He was the fiery, hot-tempered man of action, who did and risked while others lay low. Though his land was under Finch, as I have said, his actual house was in private ownership and the owner a wealthy Methodist at that, so that whatever his enormities in the eyes of Toryism there would always be a roof over his head, and he had a confidence, moreover, in his own strength and inventive genius. His feelings I believe to have been both genuine and deep. What he discerned, if only dimly, was that he was fighting for

<sup>1</sup> Small cart mounted directly on the axle

eternal values, and the vision, blurred though it might be by prejudice and personal animosity, was always there

But a far more dominating personality was William Cash, whom the village knew as Bradford Billy. His father was a local farmer and still living on my return to the village, but William had been forced to leave Heathley in his youth, either as a result of some escapade or for too forcible an expression of Radical opinions. His father had been a tailor and William became a tailor in Bradford, and in that stronghold of Radicalism he learned much, even if his vast reading was often ill-digested. Then after many years he returned to Heathley, and to his own house, and there opened a tailor's shop. It was he also who sold the weekly papers which he fetched in his pony-cart from Wortley Station every Friday night. So desperate was his Radicalism that with almost bated breath it was whispered that his own paper was that known to us as *Reynolds's*.

He was a man of commanding presence, tall, well-held, and deliberate of movement, and his goatee beard—the only one in all our district—somehow set him apart. His voice, tinged with a northern accent, had always the sly quality of innuendo, and irony was his principal weapon. It was he who lent me *Alton Locke*, which I read many times before I was in my teens, and there were other books that he lent me too, such as *Hypatia* and *Past and Present*. That last I found heavy going, until I came to the middle section which, as you may know, relates the life and work of the great Abbot Sampson. Imagine my amazement and delight when I read that the young man who had determined to be a monk had left his native village of Tottley early one morning and had come across country to the Peddars' Way which would lead him straight to the abbey at Bury St Edmunds. At that some irresistible urge drove me to read that book on Tottley Heath and I used to make my way there and lie under a clump of pines that overlooked the ancient track.

But the influence of Cash was limited largely to the older generation, most of whom were beyond conviction, and even among them his influence slowly waned. For in the eyes of the village youths and all the younger generation he was a subject for baiting and caricature. Heathley had no use for accents other than its own, and the rare Londoners who came to stay with relatives were regarded as queer fish. Then there

was Cash's pontifical slowness of speech and the pompous aloofness of his walks in public, and it was as Bradford Billy that he was referred to behind his back and not as Mr Cash. In the nickname was derision and it was a derision that Cash's enemies fostered.

In the upstairs room of an empty cottage south of the school was what was known as the Reading Room, and there the older lads and young men would assemble of a winter evening to play bagatelle on a decrepit board, or cards and draughts, though often the night would end in horseplay of the roughest. The daily paper—*The Eastern Daily Press*—arrived there from Wortley Station early in the afternoon and Cash, as a member, would sit there and read it in peace. But when the paper was delayed he would be forced to come in the evening, and then it was the aim of 'them chaps' as the village called them, to harass and annoy. Once he found the paper wrapped around something and when he unwrapped it, that something fell out. Thereupon he insisted on an immediate meeting of the somewhat helpless committee and described what had happened. One member, who found his accent hard to follow, asked again what had been wrapped in the newspaper. Cash drew himself up.

'Haven't I told you?' he said. 'A rot. A great rot!'

That phrase, with Heathley's idea of his pronunciation of *rat* was for long a catch-phrase, and it was such things that made Cash a smaller man. For had he taken himself less seriously from the first and laughed with those who tried their crude jokes, I think the village would have had for him not only respect but some measure of affection, and he might have become a tremendous power from within the village instead of from without, and through a Rural District Council.

I dwell upon William Cash because even in his later impotency he was a figure that dominated the village, and in his contemptuous aloofness and as contemptuous appearances, very much of an enigma. But in his early years his Radicalism was fearless, and he was the recognized chairman at meetings and his house election headquarters. In our local branch of the Oddfellows' Society he was the principal figure, and there the village was incalculably in his debt. Thanks to his handling and control the branch was the most flourishing in the district, and I have often wondered whether it was his influence

that accounted for the fact that nine-tenths of the Oddfellows were Liberals, just as most Foresters were Conservatives

He was a shrewd man of business and as soon as tailoring no longer paid, he set up as a coal merchant and prospered. And there again one unhappy remark did enormous harm to the cause

He was a careful man and lived sparingly and in the village he had no competitor in the coal trade. So when a customer drew only a hundredweight or two behind in his payments, he would make a personal call, and unless he received his money would threaten either to cut off supplies or bring the debtor to court. One man protested that to pay money down was often hard, especially when a large family had to be fed.

'Fed?' said Cash. 'I live on a herring a day and so can you and they.'

Those were the days when a box of Yarmouth bloaters could be bought for a shilling so no wonder the village scorned a standard so low. And at the next meeting he was heckled and asked to reconcile the statement with his public pleas for a higher standard of living for the labourer.

But the whirligig of time brought its revenges. Cash saved and saved and his money was invested in little properties which he bought for a song. Later he would boast of owning stocks and shares. Finally he ended his days, and by virtue of a rotation chairmanship of a Rural District Council, as a magistrate, and as near a Tory as makes no difference.

I can see him still in his walks through the village, head high and unmoving, but with eyes that marked each movement and change. When men saw him coming they would avoid him, but if he met a man his lip would curl and he would make some dry, ironic remark that had a bearing on local politics or the established system. And as if neither expecting a reply nor wanting one he would walk straight on, and with something of amused contempt, steps always unhurried and eyes on the distance ahead.

Of his motives you may have made your own estimate. As a friend he was treacherous for he would brook no rival near his self-appointed throne, and it was his personal profit and the warming of his own enmities that lay nearest his heart. As an enemy he was ruthless and utterly unscrupulous.

My father and he were at first hand in glove and then something happened, Cash was a school manager and when

the time came for contracting for the annual supply of coal, he was ineligible by virtue of his office. But his son, then with a bakery business along the Shopleigh Road, put in a tender in his own name and secured the contract. That was a something my father could not stomach, and it was his principal grievance against the Reverend that he had sat by as chairman and let so scandalous an arrangement pass unchallenged. At any rate my father spoke his mind and thereafter he had an enemy who made him pay dear.

But at this distance of years I own freely that there was much that my boyhood owed to William Cash. Like others, and not least myself, he was his own enemy. Self-discipline and a vision wider and more clear might have made him a tremendous power in Liberalism and indeed a notable man. Even a sense of humour that pivoted less on personal ironies might have taken him far beyond the position in local and parochial politics to which he ultimately attained, and in which he took so amusing and portentous a pride.

The third in the triumvirate was Peacock, the Prudential Insurance agent. Where he first gained a passion for politics and an interest in his fellow men I do not know, but he came of Radical stock. When I first returned to the village he was a young married man, and my first contact with him was when I shot off a popgun at a venture and the acorn struck his toddling son plumb in the middle of the forehead.

His cottage was privately owned and in a way he had more freedom than either of his elders, and his opportunities to serve the cause were far greater, for his round included not only all Heathley to its remotest confines but the fringes of neighbouring hamlets as well, and when a man is expected to be a bringer of news he has no difficulty in distributing doctrine.

At first he was a collaborator with Cash. Then came the inevitable break and the two became bitter enemies. But Cash received far more than he gave, for Peacock had in his armoury the one weapon that the other lacked, an indomitable cheerfulness and the gift of poking sly fun. But after the break with Cash, Peacock became close to my father, though I would not call him a disciple. For he had a patience that my father never possessed and a vision less blurred. My father believed, and most confidently at election times, that the Breckland world could be changed by some simple



legislative process Peacock, eternal optimist though he was, saw deeper and farther, and maybe because his roots were in the present and his contacts more numerous and vital

He became a local preacher and I remember his sermons for their homely imagery, and their plain-speaking enlivened always by a quiet humour To me he was always something of a hero for even between elections he would canvass for the cause and speak at open-air meetings A determined attempt was made to dislodge him, for an anonymous letter was written to his superiors denouncing his political activities as harmful to his work But that letter—and most guessed its authorship—missed fire badly, for Peacock was a go-ahead canvasser whose returns always showed a year as better than its predecessor

Later he set up in the drapery business and made a useful living at it It gave him, too, more time for local and district affairs, and when Labour, the natural successor of Radicalism, came to the fore, he threw himself into that movement with all the vigour of his earlier years Then, and no man rejoiced more than I or so richly savoured the irony, he became a magistrate!

And if the word irony needs explaining, what I hasten to add is this It was that a Radical and a rebel should occupy, and with distinction, a seat among those whose fathers had been the die-hard supporters of those things against which Peacock had fought and which my boyish mind had learned to lump together, as we say, under the convenient title of Church and State





## *Chapter V*

### THE RISING GENERATION

THE Risin Generation—that was what George Spline called the youth of the village, at least it was a phrase that he used when he prayed in Heathley chapel on a Sunday night at prayer meeting

When he had exhausted the few preliminaries, all of which we knew by heart, he would come to the subject for which all we boys were shamefacedly waiting

‘Lord, bless the risin generation,’ he would say ‘Bless our boys and girls and our young people’

But he would never get any farther Sometimes he would not get beyond the ‘boys’, for he was a man of turgid and easily summoned emotions and his voice would be quavering by the time he had mentioned the rising generation and would then be an incoherence of blubbering and tears I would always wince at that display of emotion and could see in it no sincerity It was true that George occasionally assisted in the Sunday School and I still remember a necktie that he always wore It was of shot silk, the general effect a vivid green that turned to a lilac when the light changed it I loved that tie It was an ambition of mine that as soon as I was a man I would buy one like it

But in daily life George, with the keepers,<sup>1</sup> ranked as a deadly enemy On the Park alongside the churchyard and in full view of the Hall was a sweet-chestnut that grew the largest nuts I have ever seen on a tree in England To say they were as fine as the best Spanish nuts is no exaggeration, and as

<sup>1</sup> Gamekeepers.

soon as they were reported falling we boys would make our way there. The churchyard was surrounded by trees and even the brick paths were hemmed in with box and holly, which made in autumn a smell that was earthy and funereal. In that undergrowth we would conceal ourselves and hunt for sticks and missiles to hurl up the tree. When the coast was reported clear of gardeners on the Hall lawns we would emerge and up would be hurled the sticks and down would come the nuts. But before we had been there ten minutes there would be the sound for which we had all been listening. George's house overlooked the Park and the road to the church, and either he would observe our stealthy approach or his ears were amazingly sensitive to the sound of hurtling sticks among the boughs. But we would hear him coming. He was a big man, ruddy of hair and hue and much given to perspiration. 'Darn ye!' he would holler as soon as he neared 'I know who y'are'.

Then we would scatter among the box and holly and he would be hollering and shaking his stick and in full view of the Hall, and always the last thing he did was to mop his face and neck with a huge red handkerchief. I know now that those exhibitions were for the benefit of Squire Green and that his claiming to know us was a bluff, for he never complained to my father. Indeed, when the nuts were toasted at night, my father would eat his share and knew well enough the tree from which they came.

In Heathley the rising generation was of two classes. The jevveniles—or in your more fashionable English, juveniles—were children still at school, and the term 'them chaps' comprised lads who had left school and the young unmarried men. Of the girls I know little, except that when they left school most seemed to go into domestic service in neighbouring towns and villages, though the daughters of farmers would help in house and dairy.

Heathley school served not only the village and its outlying parts but the fringes of all neighbouring villages as well. Of mornings and all the year round you would see the children tramping in from the confines of Illboro, from cottages beyond the Top Breck, from Brackford and even a hamlet that lay beyond it towards Shopleigh. There were a hundred and fifty of us, from those who could just manage the walk to strapping lads and louts of fourteen whose parents could

afford to leave them at school until the time of official withdrawal. Clothes were much of a muchness. Boys wore corduroys and stout hobnail boots, and the girls all had their pinafores. They were a motley, noisy, unruly crowd, and immediately after morning and afternoon school our orders were to come home at once. It was not snobbery or the thought that we should be contaminated by playing with our fellows, it was just a natural precaution. In an annexe of the main building the schoolmaster's wife, Mary Balfour, with a young assistant, looked after the infants. John Balfour was in charge of all the rest and with him would be a pupil teacher and a sort of apprentice. The time will come later to speak of John Balfour, but already you may have some idea of the daily task that confronted him.

Among all the causes of rural depopulation there are two which I have rarely heard mentioned, if at all. Of these one was avoidable. The other, at which we shall arrive in this chapter, was inevitable and a mere incident in the course of scientific progress.

To my way of thinking it was the curriculum of a village school of fifty years ago that contributed most to the ultimate depopulation. It is difficult to speak temperately of those who bore the responsibility, but undoubtedly the education of rural England was directed from Whitehall by those whose knowledge of the countryside and its problems must have been less than superficial. A general yard-stick of curriculum convenience regimented and controlled us. As examples of incompetence, ignorance, and indifference, those curricula are surely unique.

Take a purely negative appraisal. There was no domestic science of even the most elementary and theoretical type, nor handicrafts for the lads. The rudiments of farming by which the village lived, were untaught, and the principles of cropping, husbandry, or even gardening, and that though there was ample land available for each grown lad to have had his tiny plot. Of knowledge of the countryside, its fauna, flora, and history, nothing was ever imparted. Leisure of the immediate present or the ultimate future was wholly uncatered for and there were no organized games.

What then was taught? The Three R's certainly and thoroughly if within the stringent and closely defined limits of the curriculum. Writing was emphasized, but only when

'writing' became a set lesson, which meant copying some printed and usually incomprehensible motto a dozen times in copper-plate in a special book till a page was filled. At other times we used slates, and copper-plate was impossible. Reading was from various antiquated 'Readers' well known to our fathers and mothers, and their contents the quick-witted among us soon knew by heart. In arithmetic, once the tables and the elements were known, we came to 'Problems' quantities of wall-paper required for rooms, the filling and emptying of mysterious tanks, the speeds of locomotives and ultimately there would come a long period spent over stocks and shares. Even I—and I say that because my wits were as quick as most—saw no connection between those mysterious terms and any business transactions with which I was acquainted, and when Bradford Billy would boast of his investments I doubt if six people in the village had the vaguest notion of what he meant by stocks and shares.

History consisted of a couple of weekly lectures given by John Balfour to the upper half of that very mixed assembly, and of the nineteenth century and the elements of local government nothing was taught. Geography meant copying maps and printing place-names neatly, or we would commit to memory and recite, parrot-fashion, the rivers of a continent or the towns on some great river. Music consisted of attempts to follow John Balfour's pointer as it moved from note to note on the chart of tonic sol-fa, and of the learning by heart of two new songs each year. These would be sung in unison and so trivial were they that I cannot for the life of me recall the name of even one.

In English, literature was disregarded except for the learning by heart of certain printed extracts handed to us on cards. One was a selection from Shelley's *Skylark*. Even now I cannot help smiling grimly at the thought of us wrestling with

Profuse strains of unpremeditated art

Of creative written work I remember little, but sometimes a story would be read to us from a printed series and we would be told to reproduce it in our own words. The time available for John Balfour to assess the value of, or even to correct those efforts may be estimated. As for drawing, that was never of natural objects. Once the elements of perspective were taught we drew cubes, rectangles, triangles, and cones

from the usual papier-mâché models, and the principal thing was the 'finishing-off', which meant an erasure of what was called rough work and a rendering of the whole in a clear line with a well-sharpened pencil on which we bore heavily. 'Drawing in Freehand' was a term familiar to us, but surely hands were never less free.

Such was education in Heathley. When at a very early age I left for the ancient Grammar School at Ouseland—a departure that was a nine days' wonder, so great a break was it with tradition—young men who had been my immediate predecessors at the village school would come to the house and ask if I might do some 'measuring up'. That was for piece work and generally for areas of beet that had been 'chopped out', which was our term for singling. Thanks to the private coaching I had received from John Balfour I was able to work out acreages, and that they were roughly correct is shown by the fact that never did I know them questioned by steward or agent. I mention that merely as a comment on the value of our arithmetic and its remoteness from our daily lives.

What pride or pleasure derived from his schooling would a Heathley youth then take in his work or his village? What outlet was there for energy or interest? for even the monotonous and arduous work on a farm would still leave unexhausted the abundant energy of youth. The little he retained from his years of school was the ability to read, and yet the love of reading and all its adventurous exploration could never be implanted in him. But of that there will be more to say when we come to talk of the Mound and 'them chaps'.

As I may have indicated, we children of the Home family were somewhat segregated in our leisure, for not only did we have to come straight home from school, but in the evenings were never allowed to go near the centre of the village and the Mound. That again was not snobbery but the wisest of precautions, for the horseplay there was the roughest and the language often coarse. The children with whom we played were carefully selected, and most of our summer evening leisure was spent at that ruined thatched cottage owned by Bradford Billy and at a game of our own devising, at least I never heard it mentioned or saw it elsewhere. It was called, 'Up for Colley', and that last word is purely phonetic for I

have never seen it in print. It was played with a tennis ball which was thrown high on the thatched roof with the thrower calling the name of some other player. That player had to catch the ball as it fell from the eaves. If he caught it he became the thrower and called another name. If he dropped it we scattered and ran and he had to throw it. If he hit a player, the one struck had a point scored against him, but if he missed, the point was scored against himself. Three points were enough to put one out and so the game proceeded until the winner alone was left.

But that was a game we played with the girls, if there were not enough boys for cricket. Cricket was played with a soft ball on a very wide grass verge immediately opposite the chapel, where we would be rarely disturbed by passing horses and carts. My father, who wanted his boys to be cricketers, had bought for us at an auction a collection of cricket gear which included some real bats, and of boys' sizes, and I remember that they had originally been used by the Mann family, one of whom became subsequently the captain of Middlesex. Almost the only spectator we ever had was strangely enough William Cash, who would halt for a few moments as he passed on his evening walks. But he would never speak to us and on his face would be that dour ironical smile. Maybe he would be thinking of his own youth, for then he had been a cricketer and it was said that he was the most notable long-stop Heathley ever had, for he would stuff his socks and so cover his shins with grass that he could stop a ball with them as efficiently as a wicket-keeper with his pads.

But Spring was a trying time for the sons of farmers and those who owned horses, for the young grass appears more quickly on roadside verges than in meadows, and it was our lot to mind the horses while they grazed. As each farmer had his recognized road or lane it meant that the minder was generally alone until dusk and with little except bird-nesting to pass the time. Our principal amusement on those long evenings was to make whistles out of young sycamore and hazel. This was a fairly simple process. By moistening the wood with spittle and tapping it with our shut-knives the bark could be removed whole, and then the wood could be cut away to make a blow hole and another hole for the insertion of a pea, after which the bark was replaced.

Such things may sound naïve to a sophisticated generation but for all our toys we had to depend upon our own creative and inventive efforts. In autumn each boy would pride himself on the possession of a popgun. These were made from elder and if possible of wood at least two inches in diameter and a foot in length, and as a piece of that size had to be cut between the knots of a stem it took a considerable deal of finding. But we scoured the woods and dodged the keepers, and then one day I discovered in that wood at Moat Farm among the cob-nut bushes a vast clump of elder from which I could cut a gun of almost eighteen inches length and that made me the envy of every boy in Heathley.

From the elder the pith was removed and generally with the co-operation of George Dew, the blacksmith, who burnt it out with a red-hot rod. A notch was cut to mark the end in which a half acorn would be inserted. The stick or firing rod was always of sere hazel, shaped to fit the pith hole with the rest of the wood as a handle and stop. On the end we would spit and hammer it on the ground till the fibres spread and made a firing cushion. In the far end would be inserted a half acorn, the projectile of another half acorn would be inserted in the business end, the handle of the stick would be planted firmly against the stomach and the stick rammed home. Out would go the fired acorn and one would be left in the end for the firing of a new shot.

As for the rest of our games, they followed each other yearly in precise rotation—hoops (iron ones made by Dew) for those who could afford them, and then marbles, and finally tops, the last often home-made. So much for Spring and early Summer. On hot summer afternoons in the holidays the village boys would go bathing, or wading as we always called it, in the pits of farms or the Common. Village mothers encouraged this for it saved official washing, but their views might have been changed had they seen the black mud and green slime with which we would be coated when we emerged. Bathing costumes and towels were unknown to us and we would run stark naked till the hot air dried us. I, being of an adventurous turn of mind, would go with my particular crony to the Plains and there run the gauntlet of the keepers.

But what I would most look forward to in the spring was a day's nesting, not for ordinary eggs, but for those of water-hens and wild ducks. All the family would look forward to



those days, for when the eggs were brought home my mother would line a huge dish with pastry and there would be a delicious egg custard for the family. All of us had our share, and I, as the founder of the feast, was generally given a second helping.

For me those were days of tremendous excitement for I would venture into haunts unknown by village boys, far out on the heaths and in the woods and often within a few yards of the house of a keeper. My weapon would be a long willow rod on the end of which was tied a tablespoon, and if the nest was in deep water and unapproachable by any other means, the eggs could be removed one by one with the aid of the spoon. Then they would be tested in water. If they sank at once they were fresh. If they fell rather sluggishly they were just tainted, but I was always furious when my mother discarded them, for their taste in my opinion would have been as good. Often a nest would have to be left because it was utterly inaccessible, and in that context I cannot help relating a tragedy that comes back to me as vividly as if it were only yesterday.

I had been through the Illboro low meadows and swamps and by the time I had eaten my frugal lunch I had had a miraculously successful morning, and the large tin which I always carried was piled high with the eggs of water-hens. Then at the very last pit on the homeward journey I saw a nest. It was in a wood and in the middle of deep black water at the root of a fallen tree, and so deep was the water that the tree itself was submerged. I climbed a larch on the bank and from there could see that the nest had in it many eggs, but how to reach them was beyond me, for they were yards from the full length of my willow-pole. So I stripped to the skin and tried wading, but before I had stepped in a couple of yards the icy water so pained my legs and ankles that I scrambled out again. Then I had an idea. The great storm of a few years before had strewn the wood with fallen trees, and I hunted about till I found a short fallen section of oak, which could be used as a raft. It was too heavy to carry or even move, so with a pole I levered it towards the bank. As it reached that bank and was about to topple over I heard a queer crunching sound. What it could be I could not imagine, and then when the log turned again at my levering, I knew, for I had rolled it over my tin of eggs! Never shall

I forget my despair. It was beyond grief and tears, and even to this day I can hear that tragic and heartrending crunch.

If I describe very briefly one of our winter evenings in the house, it is because it probably resembled the evening of other families of the same class as ourselves. If visitors were not expected the evening would be spent in the living-room, and after tea we would gather round the fire. My father had made for us children a whole series of tiny stools and chairs, and he would sit in his grandfather chair reading a book or the newspaper after a day in the fields. But he took great pride in himself as a fire-maker and it would annoy him that we children should be sitting with noses near the grate, and when it was too much for him he would spring to his feet.

'I don't know,' he would say. 'I think I can shift you, together. If not, I'll suffer to be hung.'

Then he would stir the fire and pile on logs interspaced with shiny coal and in a few minutes our stools and chairs would be shuffling back. Then he would be chuckling to himself and it was in such genial moments that he would lay aside his paper and begin to talk.

Often my mother would play games with us. When the lamp was lighted the heavy green tablecloth would be spread and out would come the Ludo board and we would play till it was time for the girls to go to bed. Cards, except Happy Families and Snap, were unknown in the house, for they came under the heading of the Devil's Picture-books. But occasionally we would play Halma, though that was too difficult for the younger ones, and well I remember the first introduction of Tiddly-Winks. Sometimes I would play draughts with my mother or father, but always with a hope that they had forgotten the clock and my time for bed. Then at about half-past nine my father would utter his usual formula, and I would hear it from my bedroom if I was still awake. There would be the shuffle of his feet, the scrape of his chair on the bricks as he pushed it back, and then 'Well, I think I'll be going up Wooden Hill.'

And by half-past nine, except for the rare stray revellers from the village pubs, the whole village would be in bed and most would be asleep. But there was nothing uncanny about the quiet, and even the heavy dark had its friendly and

particular sounds There would be the cry of an owl perhaps, and in summer the swish of a bat or a lumbering may-bug And friendliest of all would be a sound that came from a far distance—the barking of a dog from some keeper's cottage or lonely farm far out on the brecks or heaths

'Them chaps' would spend their winter evenings in the Reading Room, as I have said, but it is of their summer evenings that I want to speak, and of that second reason which in my view contributed to rural depopulation

On a summer evening from about six o'clock those lads and young men would assemble on the Mound, and there they would play till well after dusk There would be forty or fifty of them perhaps, and in that confined space they seemed a veritable multitude There would be an audience too, for older men would lean against a wall and watch, and others at the *Lion* would sit at the benches with their beer mugs What I remember of the Mound is the shouting, the laughter, and the wild tumultuous life Rounders was a favourite game, for the trees made convenient bases, and there would be so many in the fielding side that to sneak a move from base to base was a feat in itself Sometimes, when they tired of Rounders, they would organize a game of Hare and Hounds, and the whole village would hear them yelling and running down Wortley Road and across Stile Meadow maybe, or Parliament Path, and as they neared, mothers would call in the younger children and close their doors till the mad rush had swept by Sometimes there would be a clod fight on the Mound Sides would be chosen and the weapons would be grass sods wrenched from the verges, and these they would hurl at each other and often at the passers-by I remember well one evening when on some authorized errand I was passing the Mound and a clod fight was on Young Lister, son of John Lister of the miraculous adze and himself the deadliest of shots, saw me stand and gape and promptly hurled at me a huge clod that landed clean in the pit of my stomach My mouth closed, my knees sagged, and for a moment I knew the bitterness of death Then I wheezed, gurgled, and groaned, and then at long last my breath came slowly back, and with green face and unsteady legs I sidled unnoticed on my way

Of the other activities of 'them chaps' more will be said in due course But suddenly all that young life began to

disappear and in a year or two it had completely gone, and it might be worth while to find for ourselves the reasons why.

I have said that Heathley was self-contained. Practically our only contacts were with the neighbouring villages whom we played at cricket. So remote were we that even the adjacent Midlands were known to us vaguely as the Sheers. London was something of which we read in the newspaper, or saw when we looked at the gays, which was our name for illustrations. It is true that some of our younger men of the required standard would occasionally become policemen at Norwich, and more rarely, in London itself, but such departures were uncommonly few.

To most places to which we wished to go, we walked. When the pony was not available, my mother would even walk four miles each way to the dressmaker, and for a man to walk to Hareborough and back, which was twelve miles, was accounted as nothing. Bicycles were few, heavy, and clumsily made and with the hard tyres that gave them, for us, the persistent name of bone-shakers. In my earliest days the cushion tyre appeared and bicycles began to be more numerous, though among the labouring classes they were still rare. Then came the invention of the pneumatic tyre and the drop-handle, each in its way not only to revolutionize the comfort of the bicycle and to increase its range, but to give it a fascination it had not hitherto possessed. William Cash's son set up a bicycle shop and there was a system of easy payments, and in less than no time there was no lad or youth in the village who had not the ambition to own a bicycle. And that, in my view, was the second contributory cause of rural depopulation.

Once the young men had their bicycles the Mound began to pall. Like a flock of wild-fowl they would be away at nights to a flower show perhaps in some distant village, or to a fete or circus in a neighbouring town, and then there would descend upon Heathley a silence such as in summer it had never known. If there was a moon the whole band would set out for Norwich, which was twenty-three miles away. There was a Hippodrome there and every kind of attraction that would hold them till long after dark, and then in the late moonlight we would hear them riding home. At Norwich, and even in the smaller towns, they made new contacts. They saw the houses of town-dwellers, and their amenities

and learned of their wages, and there is no wonder that the towns drew them like a magnet. Thirty years ago one saw on the Mound of a summer evening only a handful of small children at their play. With the departure of 'them chaps' the ancient Reading Room went, though a new one was ultimately built in its place. In it were no batters of William Cash, or games and wild horseplay, for it was administered by a committee who controlled only too easily the rare lads and youths who frequented it.

But when I think of the Heathley of fifty years ago and on a summer evening, when I hear the playing of children, it is the Mound that comes back to my mind. To me they are not all familiar faces that are gone, but the shadowy faces of those I cannot recall even by name, and yet there is the recalling. For my own vanished youth there is only rarely a poignancy, but—and this you may find it hard to understand—for those lads and their cheerful voices, wild horseplay, and young abounding vitality, there is always something beyond the arrogance of tears. And I think of them most in one peculiar and highly personal context when by chance I hear that song of the Kerry Dancing and the youth of the Irish village and its scattered cabins at their evenings in the glen. For the Mound was our glen, and our youth, too, has gone, and it is not Ireland alone that holds a monopoly of that power of the individual heart to hymn its threnody for a vanished past.





## *Chapter VI*

### THE LABOURER AND THE LAND

I HAVE said that in Heathley there were many who remain vividly in my mind men who being dead yet speak, and of whom Heathley will talk as my father talked of the giants of his own and his father's past. But they were not to be found among the agricultural workers—labourers, as we always called them—and reasons are not far to seek.

The pay of a Breckland labourer of fifty years ago was at the most twelve shillings a week. If he was a team-man or had stock to feed he was paid an extra shilling to compensate for his Sunday work. But those amounts must not be regarded as settled and perpetual payment. They were, indeed, liable to violent modifications. In a period of bad weather, as, for instance, of continued snow, or if work for some reason or other happened to be scarce or if there were advantage in its being deferred, then a labourer might be stood off and in that case he would have to obtain Parish Relief. Every winter a good many labourers would be thus stood off. Those who were still in employment had often to consider themselves fortunate for they had been transferred to helping the keepers or warreners or to clearing oddments of timber from the woods. But there was also a considerable deal of extra pay, and for what we call 'taking' work. I have already mentioned the singling of beet when the custom would be to pay so much an acre and the labourer could therefore work as long and as hard as he liked. Haysel was rarely 'taking' work and it was harvest that for the labourer was a harvest in more senses than one.

The custom was this Through some peculiar channels word would come in that in the surrounding villages so much was being paid for harvest, and we will assume that that sum was five pounds Thereupon Heathley labourers would send their various spokesmen to interview stewards or farmers and it might be agreed that a Heathley harvest should be five pounds also Harvest then became work taken for the sum of five pounds, though such things as times of carting and the order in which fields were cut were under the control of the employer I have known a harvest begun and finished in under a fortnight, but that was due to exceptional weather The labourer accounted himself lucky if he finished in three weeks I have also known periods of disaster when a harvest took so long that the labourer was very much out of pocket and the flood year of 1912 was such a season, when corn cut in early August was still on the shock in late September

Naturally the labourer at harvest had to work hard and long Men might be mowing barley at earliest sun-up and carting wheat when the dew was heavy and dusk well in the sky, and yet if the weather were favourable he might earn four times his usual weekly wage But there was more to it than that The summer holiday had to coincide with harvest and any lad who was capable of work could find it on the farm on which his father was employed There would, for instance, be rakes to drag and the most trustworthy could manage a horse rake Then there was hollering "Hold ye!" as we called it, which meant sitting on a horse when corn was being carted and hollering to warn the loader that the wagon was about to move The pay of boys varied greatly and even from farm to farm, but it was a poor lad who could not earn ten shillings, and many got as much as thirty

There then indeed was the labourer's annual harvest The money that came in had to tide the family through the year Rent might be deducted from it, and little accumulated bills might be settled at the local shops Above all, the weeks after harvest saw special Harvest Sales, not only in Hareborough and Ouseland, but in Heathley itself, and clothes and household furnishings would be bought for the coming year

The outgoings, other than food, were proportionately high Rents varied from one shilling to as much as half a crown, but in the latter case the cottage would probably be a large one and in it would be the labourer's sons who also

worked on the land and contributed their quota to the house. A copper or two a week went to the Insurance Society, and for each senior member of the household, for burial with respect was a thing that was never far from the labourer's mind. Then there were the weekly contributions to his Friendly Society who would tide him over when he was sick, but took no account of unemployment. Something like a panel system prevailed and not until the Club doctor had certified the man as ill could he go 'on the Club' as we called it and draw sick benefit. Even if his disablement were only a sprained limb he was not allowed to leave the village or set his hand to any work. William Cash was a terror for nosing out a man who thought he could potter about in his garden or even earn an odd shilling in addition to his sick benefit.

The hours of a labourer varied with the sun, and the coming of spring was announced as early as St Valentine's Day, and then a labourer worked from six to six. There was no half-holiday on a Saturday and if a young labourer wished to play cricket it meant an interview with the farmer or steward and such interviews were definitely discouraged. As for judging the passage of time most of the older labourers possessed an inherited watch of the kind known as a turnip—which we pronounce tannup—but the time could also be gathered from the sound of a train as it came through the woods towards Wortley Station. A man would say, 'There go the old quarter arter nine', or, 'Here come the old six o'clock,' and that might mean it was time to knock off.

A labourer's clothes were simple and easy enough to obtain in Heathley itself. Fifty years ago the smock had disappeared except for warreners and shepherds, and the usual garb would be what was called a sleeved waistcoat with corduroy trousers and stout boots, and if the job demanded it, buskins, as we called leggings. His working hat would be something with a broadish brim and known as a 'Chummy'. His Sunday suit would usually be the black broadcloth in which he had been married or which he had inherited from his father, and when the young bloods of the village wanted a new or Sunday suit they could get a ready-made one from a choice of patterns at Robert Addis's shop.

The staple meat of the village was pork and the fact that there might not be an 'r' in the month made no difference whatever, except that a housewife would have difficulty in



hot weather in keeping a joint from going bad. One practice was to de-bone it and put it in a meat-safe and suspend it by a rope just over the water of a deep well. Pork could be bought at one of the village shops, but usually a man would buy a whole or half quarter when a neighbour killed a pig and, if he had a sty of his own, would similarly transfer a portion when his own pig was killed. It was a habit years ago to allude to Norfolk labourers as Norfolk Dumplings, but what Norfolk dumplings were I have rarely found one who knew, though most thought them to be those soggy masses of dough that are boiled with a stew. But this is a Norfolk dumpling and here is the recipe. It is a man's recipe and given in a man's way, with no finnickin' references to exact tablespoons of this and teaspoons of that.

#### RECIPE

Make enough pudding crust which when shaped would make a circle of six inches diameter, but with the crust there should be incorporated somewhere about a dessert spoonful of finely grated raw onion. The filling is lean and fat pork cut into small dice and with it is also incorporated raw onion to taste, together with salt and pepper. The pudding is then put in the usual cloth and boiled the requisite time.

To-day, of course, you would make that pudding in a basin and it may not be till the end of the war that you will be able to make it at all. But I will tell you this, that when that pudding is cut open there pervades the room an aroma that would make a dead man turn in his grave, sit up, and find himself drooling at the mouth.

But the labourer took that pudding to work, and cold. With his shut-knife he divided it and one half would be his breakfast and the rest his dinner. With it, or instead of it, he might have what was known as a thumb-bit, which would be a huge slab of bread on which, held down by the thumb while he ate, would be a slice of cold pork or cheese, and he would cut alternate pieces of bread or meat and convey them to his mouth with the end of his knife. Even to-day I have no special use for sandwiches, it is the thumb-bit that I prefer.

In almost every village kitchen there would be a huge salt pot in which pork was kept. But not only the accredited joints were eaten. Head and trimmings would be boiled down to make pork cheese, as we called it, though you may

know it as brawn The small guts would be scraped for use as sausage skins and the stomach and the larger guts were a delicacy They were known as 'pigs' bellies', but I will not give you a recipe, for whether your stomach be queasy or not, it would turn long before the dish was ready for the table For the belly and guts, smoking hot from the animal, would first have to be emptied, and then twice every day for a week the wife would turn them inside out and wash in fresh water, and in summer the stench would be indescribable But by the end of the week there would be no trace of smell, and when they were boiled their flesh, if I may so call it, would be white as the breast of a chicken and tender enough to be eaten with a fork Vegetables, as I have said, were plentiful and superbly grown Most cottages had very large gardens and there were also in the village various allotments Farm-house butter cost from tenpence to a shilling a pound, but it was pork dripping that was largely eaten Even to-day I prefer it to any butter in the world, and you can take this, if you like, for another recipe Roast a piece of fat loin and in the pan put a very little water in which is some grated raw onion When the dish is cold you will find there both dripping and jelly and both should be spread on bread with a little salt and pepper

Skimmed milk, which is what the village generally used, was amazingly cheap, and before morning school you could see the children with their milk cans going to the farms to fetch it The new milk had been put into great flat earthenware pans and when the cream had been removed from them, the residue was sold A whole canful of three or four pints would rarely cost more than a halfpenny Eggs were never more than one penny each and at Easter, when they were plentiful, they were a halfpenny

Cottages were generally pitifully small, and the ceilings were almost always little more than six foot in height There would be a small living-room and a kitchen-scuttery, and lucky was the housewife who possessed a pantry Most cottages had only two bedrooms and since families were large there was tremendous overcrowding, and in my youth there were many deaths from tuberculosis, consumption, or galloping consumption, as we called it Cottages with one bedroom would be allotted to a widow or an old couple, and the very large families had cottages accordingly In the case of Sam

Smith, William Cash's coalman, that was necessary for he had a family of sixteen Kerridge, who was a farmer, however, could beat that record with a family of seventeen. Sanitation was of the most primitive kind. My father remembered rails across an open ditch, but in my young time most cottages had closets, communal ones for a pair or group, at the far end of the garden, and these consisted of a kind of movable framework over an enormous excavation known as a bumby-hole. When these holes were full to the top, or when closets, as very often, were within a few feet of the back door, it took a good many moss roses to counteract the smell. Nearly every cottage had its individual well and it is a curious fact that when a man did away with himself, from weakness of brain perhaps or dread of the workhouse, it was by jumping into the well that he would finish his days.

The labourer or small farmer had one rather unique insurance against unexpected disasters. If, for instance, a cow died or a horse or a labourer's pig, or fire destroyed his tools and gear, there would be circulated through the village what was known as a Brief. This would be a sheet of stout paper on which the Reverend would write the particular claim for consideration and charity, and he would usually head the subscription list with a guinea at the least. Then the Brief would be taken round the village and each would contribute according to his means. Even as late as just after the last war I remember a Brief. It was on behalf of Sam Smith, and an extraordinary case it was. His father was very old and somewhat weak in his wits, and so Sam, whose family had grown up and gone, took him into his cottage. Now Sam, thanks perhaps to the contributions of his children, had been something of a saving man and hidden under a brick by the fireplace was a bundle of notes. These the old man one day found and thinking them of no consequence threw them into the fire. In that particular affair it was difficult to gauge the amount of one's subscription, since a good few of the uncharitable insisted that Sam had exaggerated the amount of his loss.

The Breckland labourer has changed little, except perhaps in his dress, from Cobbett's time. In most things he remains what his fathers were some hundreds of years ago. My present tense, of course, relates to fifty years ago, and even then

most of the village names were Biblical. I can think of practically no worthy after whom Heathley was not called, and there was a Caleb, a Noah or two, Enochs and Abels and nearly every prophet. Among the women were Ruths, Naomis, and there was even a Kerenhappuch, who with her sisters Kezia and Jemima, completed the daughters of Job. Much of our language, too, had a Biblical flavour. In the frail-basket of her husband a woman packed not his food but his victuals and we would talk of eating a morsel of food.

The chief characteristic of the labourer was that he was slow-moving in thought and action. We have an expression which exactly indicates the speed at which a man generally moved. We do not say, 'I saw old George comin along,' but, 'I saw old George drawin along.' There is an excellent story told of one of our labourers of whom a certain man asked the time. The labourer was driving a tumbril—tumbler as we call it—in which was a rather restive horse, and he pulled up to answer the question. As he had no watch he looked about him for a minute or two at the sun and the natural signs, and then in a drawling voice delivered himself of this:

'The time?' Well, that sorta, kinda, fare<sup>1</sup> to me as though that might be drawin along toward half arter—whoa, old hoss!—fowerl'

To my way of thinking, too, the old-time labourer was something of the Gascon of England, for among his fellows he was apt to be boastful. I remember particularly old Hammond who would attend the cricket matches when his son Ernie—which we pronounced Arnie—was playing, and all the time he would be moving about the spectators and his remarks would be something like this:

'Bast! Can't that boy Arnie hit!' or, 'Darn it! Did you ever see anyone bowl like that boy Arnie?'

As for his work, a labourer, then as now, was expected to be the master of most things, though there were some who were noted as being specialists in some particular job. There were good stackers who could build a round or a gable-ended stack with walls and roofs symmetrical as if made to measure, and there were men who were skilful at horses and had rough veterinary knowledge. There was Long Harry Jessop, so called from his height and leanness, who was a most notable

<sup>1</sup> Seems

pitcher He would wield a special pitching-fork and one sheaf at a time would not content him and, when a stranger was looking on, his way of boastfulness would be to rear three sheaves—shooofs, we called them—at a time, or a monstrous heap of barley that would sag the handle of the fork when he lifted it high above his head to a full load And there was little Jack Carman who was a wonderful wielder of a scythe, and above all on grassland I myself have mown much barley, but grass, especially when thin and sere, was always beyond me But Jack with his scythe could cut the trickiest low meadow and leave it as though it had been a lawn-mower that he had used There was John Lister, too, of the wood-yard who was a marvellous man with the adze I remember once we needed two huge oak beams clapped together to carry a roof and the join had to be so close as to be held together almost by suction John Lister took these two beams, gnarled, roughened, and warped with years of drying, and worked at them with his adze and at the end you would have thought they had been fashioned with the finest of planes and polished with sandpaper

The first man I remember working for us was known as Willo He was youngish and rather slim and I do not know if the name was a nickname which should be spelt willow, or if it were a friendly form of Will But Willo was undoubtedly a slow mover My father would say that to be sure he was moving at all one had to get him into line with some immovable object like a building or stack One day when his slowness was particularly exasperating my father said to him 'Willo, have you ever sin a hodmedod?'<sup>1</sup>

'Why, yes, master,' said Willo mildly

'Then you must have met it,' said my father, 'for you darn well never overtook it'

The end of Willo was an amusing one One day he was even more slow than usual and my father went storming across to where he was at work

'Willo,' he demanded, 'h'ain't you got a different strook<sup>2</sup> from that?'

'Why, yes, master,' said Willo

'Why don't you use it then?'

'Because I dussent,' said Willo

'Dussent?' said my father, and stared 'Why dussent ye?'

<sup>1</sup> Snail.

<sup>2</sup> Stroke or pace

"Cos that's a darned sight slower'n this," said Willo

My father, always a man of quick temper, sacked him on the spot and gave him his money. A few weeks later we heard that Willo had gone up to London to be a policeman!

I love that retort of Willo's and the unsuspected valour that prompted it. It reminds me, too, of another man who had been stubbing thistles for a rather high-handed farmer. It was the time of the war between the Greeks and the Turks, and in William Cash's bay window on a Friday night one could see the newspapers with their drawings of desperate and sanguinary battles. Now this particular labourer was something of a slow mover like Willo and none too thorough in his work.

'Master poor job you're makin on't,' stormed the farmer. 'Look at all them thistles you've left.'

'I don't know, master,' said the man. 'It'd be a rare sharp battle, wouldn't it, if all on 'em was to get killed?'

Another notable character who worked for us in my very early youth was Dodger Lake. He was a very short man and fiery-faced, and all day long he chewed tobacco. Of the village's dozen or so consistent drunkards, Dodger was the most regular. I remember one day my father and Dodger and myself were driving home in the evening from some job of work in a neighbouring village and we came to a pub.

'Think I'll be gettin off here, master,' Dodger said.

'Please yourself,' said my father, and pulled up the horse.

'Suppose you couldn't let me have a shillin?' asked Dodger.

'I certainly can't,' my father told him, for he was a teetotaler and non-smoker. 'I'm lending you no shillin to spend on beer.'

On we drove and Dodger was left behind with a prodigious thirst and never a penny in his pocket. But a few minutes later there was a tremendous noise in the garden of the pub, where Dodger had let out a sow and her litter from the sty. Out rushed the landlord to see Dodger trying to get both sow and litter back.

'Lend me a hand,' he hollered to the landlord. 'Someone went and left this here door open, and if I hadn't happened to be comin by, every darn thing in this here garden would have been et.'

Together they got the animals back and Dodger was warmly thanked.

'Better come in and have a drink,' the landlord said 'I don't know about you, but I could do with a pint'

'And so could I,' said Dodger 'And I don't know that I couldn't manage a quart'

Those were the days of signing the pledge and the Blue Ribbon Army One of my earliest and vaguest recollections is being on a platform somewhere in London with my aunt and reciting a poem of which the only line that I remember is, 'Drink, pretty creature, drink' And in Heathley, as I have said, there were at least a dozen incurable drunkards who would be found lying in ditches and under hedges on a Sunday morning or after a Flower Show or a Whitsuntide parade of the Friendly Societies, for beer was cheap enough then and reasonably potent

One Whitsuntide evening I had business that took me by the Mound and there in front of the *Lion* were two of our notorious drunkards, stripped to the waist, and fighting, and round them a ring of spectators I remember one man had a bloody nose and there was blood on his hairy chest I was fascinated and perhaps because I had been reading Borrow, and the famous fight of The Flaming Tinman, so I edged my way in to watch But someone had fetched George Dew, who was village constable, and that office might be regarded as civilian assistant to the regular policeman Old George, a timorous man at heart, came hobbling along with his game leg and the spectators drew back

'What's going on here, together?' demanded George

But the blood of the combatants was up and there was no answer

'You'll hatta stop it, together,' hollered George, and was backing away out of the reach of the wild swings And then, as no one took the least notice 'All right then, together Fare to me as though you'll hatta look arter yerselves' And with that off George went and the fight proceeded

Though I can recall almost every man and the farm at which he worked, except for such men as my father employed we had little personal contact with the village labourers, except to hear that this one perhaps was on the Club, or that that one had been drunk, or had had an increase in family, but when the weather was wet our great barn would be a general meeting-place for such men of the village who were

disinclined to drink or had no available money to spend at the pub 'Send it down, David!' would be the cry as they looked up at the rain, for rain meant rest and it was their wives who knew that it also meant less money. In the barn then my father would talk politics in his own vivid and personal way, though his listeners would comment by no more than grunts or monosyllables, afraid as ever to commit themselves. The younger and more lusty among them would tell bawdy stories of the cruder type, and then my father would hustle me off. But I never heard him check a man for the looseness of his tongue unless his language was unnecessarily foul. I think his aim was to get men to talk and be at ease and in the mood to listen to himself.

But there was one character among the men of the village who deserved at least to be called unusual. On the farms were great flocks of sheep, and this particular man—a man to me though I doubt if he were much more than twenty—was a shepherd and in charge of twenty-score ewes on the Plains. As my travels that way were generally in summer I saw him at his best, and never did I so envy a man or see a country that so resembled the Delectable Mountains. When I came to read *As You Like It*, there was Corin and the fells of the ewes and the rough surgery of sheep, for I would often help this young shepherd with his tar-pot in the season of maggots. In return he lent me books, that is if you can call Penny Dreadfuls books, for he had the most tremendous collection of Buffalo Bills and similar titles that I have ever seen. There were hundreds and hundreds of them, and I devoured them every one. One I particularly remember was about—of all things!—the Mogul Conquest of India, and it was the only one which my mother caught me reading and which she immediately confiscated in spite of my protestations that it was doing me good.

But this shepherd was also a magnificent performer on the tin whistle. He had a special whistle that was made of brass and I imagined that the melodious and intricate sounds he produced were due to some virtue of the whistle itself, for he told me it had cost sixpence. I, already a humble performer on the penny tin whistle, was at once agog to own this magic instrument, and when I had saved the necessary sum I did become its owner.

Then all my leisure was spent in practising, and at last I was